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C O N T E N T S

Nothing Can Stop It	5	*Elizabeth Wagner*
My Mother's Goofy Song	28	*John Fante*
Convalescence	34	*Kay Boyle*
Hamlet's Dagger	41	*Manuel Komroff*
Impulse	48	*Conrad Aiken*
She Walks In Beauty	60	*Martha Foley*
Masses of Men	67	*Erskine Caldwell*
Family Vitriol	77	*Mikhäil Zochtchenko*
Time	79	*H. E. Bates*
Fisherman's Bride	84	*Charles Kendall O'Neill*
Black Jesus	89	*John Cowles*

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NOTHING CAN STOP IT

by

Elizabeth Wagner

It was the most desolate outlook imaginable, but she could not turn back now. She had come too far. Standing on the platform of the shed which was really a switching station for ore trains, she peered into the jackpines which pressed so close they seemed to be resenting the very presence of the railroad. Away in the distance stretched the tracks like a stream of blood. Bright red iron ore rattling along its way to the lake port had changed the whole road-bed from brown to red. Elsewhere it might have been beautiful but here,——. She stood staring down those tracks over which she had just come. To what unknown circumstances had these rails brought her? Who would come out of the narrow road through the jackpines to take her to what mysterious destination of which she had been dreaming for months?

Spring was coming and life, wide and delicate, stretched ahead. Lovely shaped things like great white-sailed boats, ivy-covered buildings with knights peering from them. She wanted years and years of this possible loveliness. It was like a drunkenness, an excitement in her for months of argumentation with her family to let her go. "You're too young," her mother had said. "Another year of school anyway." She had looked into their faces, crying, "But you were seventeen when you were married. I must go!" "What do you know about life?" her sister had said, "You don't *know* what is real. You exaggerate everything." It was true, they called her "Zaggie." But LIFE which her sister said she couldn't meet was in capitals for her. She saw it huge, in a maze of import. Why couldn't they name the danger of which they seemed so aware? Why couldn't they name the thing from which they seemed to be protecting her?

But she had gotten away and had her first job as teacher. She had gone to her first interview with the Superintendent of Schools with mis-

givings. Would her extreme youth disqualify her even though her long brown hair was twisted at her neck? But not one word had been said of her youth. Nothing was said to bear out the unkind warnings of her family. He carefully avoided all mention of distances, all detail seemed to him unimportant. He had seemed anxious to have her. It had been flattering. He had asked for her certificate and she had signed the contract.

And now she couldn't go back even if she had wanted to. Now she was standing at the small point on the station platform, her trunk and suitcase beside her like old friends from an old dead life. Who was coming after her? She paced up and down even though her new shoes hurt.

Perhaps they had not gotten her letter. Or perhaps the Superintendent had decided she didn't look eighteen after all and had warned the school board not to take her, that an impostor was coming, a child who exaggerated and whose people wanted her at home. She felt frightened and cold. She could never return until she had conquered the thing they had prophesied for her. After all weren't mothers made to prohibit things which often turned out to be extremely pleasant? No, everything was all right. Whoever was to meet her was simply late. She was going to her "destiny," to that raw encounter with life on her own, and money in her pocket.

She looked up and down the red tracks. There was no train, she knew, for twelve hours. Maybe an ore train from the range would lumber past and she could ask for a ride on the caboose. But something seemed to assure her that any movement would have to be from that mysterious other source,—from out of her future.

Then she saw coming across the half frozen ground a horse pulling over the dead snow, over the exposed ground, an old sleigh upon which sat what seemed to be a man. He was bundled against the sharp wind. She was amazed to see with what force it pressed against him. Sheltered as she was by the small shed of a depot she had not been aware of its keenness. He was wrapped to the ears and his sharp face, peering from out the rags had all the cunning and hard foxiness of a ground squirrel in a bad year. He was as wise as the buds which knew better than to put forth until all danger of frost was gone. He drew up beside the platform.

He looked, yes, low-skinned and unaired after a long winter but his voice was friendly as he asked her if she'd waited long. "Knew you couldn't run away," he chirruped, tumbling her trunk into the back of the sleigh. She got in beside him and felt the sleigh pull out with a jerk. She prayed that Deep Gorge would be better. She knew that country could change greatly in a few miles. "Coward," she kept calling herself, "It's going to be fun teaching and the children are going to love the stories I'll tell them!"

"Long trip," he mumbled as they eyed each other closely and together pulled at an old horse blanket to cover their knees.

For the first few miles Louise's fascination at the flying heels and muddy snowballs kept her from crying out, "Take me back, please take me back!" But the horse jogged on toward the horizon.

She sat over in the sleigh as far as she could. The horse was tiring. He looked thin, as though the country did not afford him proper fare. There was a house, a store.

"Deep Gorge," said the man beside her.

"Is this Deep Gorge?" she gasped, her tongue thick. She felt torn between a desire to cry and a faint feeling, growing fainter, that she had some sort of dignity to maintain. She felt there must be some ethics to being matured, something further expected of her. How glad she was that the school wasn't there.

Deep Gorge was situated on a flat, burned-over spot, nothing around it in the way of a depression that would suggest the name. She recalled the Fish Lakes in which there was never a fish. She could see but one house in all the stump-scarred country. This stood prophetically on a small knoll, not a trace of a tree in what might have been called its front yard, its poor back humped against the elements.

The sound of the horse's hoofs jogged dismally. She thought they should muffle them and go silently, unseen, that there was some menace they should be covert against. Frequently a stone became lodged under the runner of the sleigh where they squealed and squeaked so persistently that she could scarcely keep from joining in, but she shuddered, remembering that she could no longer shriek out childishly at things which annoyed her.

She looked at her driver. He seemed at the moment to be the only other human being in the world beside herself. She made one of those

inane remarks one makes in the most extreme exigencies of contact. "I suppose you know this country pretty well?" she said.

He began suddenly to talk as if she had touched some spot setting him off, " I been living here all my life," he said, and she looked at him amazed seeing him with a life.

"Is that so?" she said politely.

She thought he was looking at her craftily. "Yes, I've taken five teachers across this here road into the Lindstrom school since it was built. . . ." He seemed to knot up into a convulsion. She thought it might be laughter.

"Five teachers," she echoed. "In how long?"

"Let's see now," he said, squinting up at the pale lost sky above them. "They built it the summer Evar died. . . ." He calculated the years of his life as if they were written in the sky, his eyes looking on the happenings of his mortal day with candor. "That's going on, that's three years this fall," he said looking at her suddenly so she saw, startling, his round blue eye. "And three of those has been this winter," he added, chuckling.

"Three this winter!" she almost shouted. "What—what was the matter? Did they get sick?"

"No," he said, flipping the reins lightly.

"Did they have to leave?"

"Nope." He flipped the horse's tail free. "Not far's I know."

She felt as if his look diminished her, that she was getting smaller and smaller. She said in a small voice:

"Something must have happened."

"Something must have," he said, and she could make nothing of that small area of wizened face sticking out of his muffler. "Pay's pretty good too. Fifty dollars ain't to be picked up just anywheres."

"No," she said. "What was it? What happened? Don't you know?" She felt as if she were going to be sick.

"Well, it just seemed like they wanted to go home," he said, and she thought she saw an evil glint from his one eye, nearest her.

Looking ahead she could see they were leaving the gravelled road, entering the swamp on a series of logs. "What's that?" she asked, choking. "What *is* that?"

"That's the corduroy," he said, gripping the reins, an intent look

on his face. The horse sent out an exploring front foot which set the loose logs trembling. Its dangers were so obvious that a rabbit might have hesitated before trusting its weight upon it. The horse seemed to decide this was no worse than other corduroys, and plunged onto it, hurrying. She watched the flying feet only by a miracle avoiding the yawning deep water holes between the frail logs. He managed to have his feet on a new place before the ends flew up menacingly, spraying them both with mossy smelling water before settling back crookedly in their places. The sleigh became a boat swaying under her. She could no longer look. She closed her eyes against the miles and miles of swamp and the small trees lying dead charred.

The horse stumbled and with his terrific plunging hurled them both forward from the seat. Then he stood still trembling, quivering, while encouragement was sent down to him through the reins. "Bad place for horses," he mumbled between his "Steady boy, steady!"

"The Lindstroms lost both their horses on this corduroy on the way to town. Broke their legs. Guess they walk to Deep Gorge for their mail and supplies now. You're going to stay with them," he said chuckling. The horse was going on gingerly.

"Mail," she thought, thinking of home.

They had a heap of bad luck," he said, clucking at the horse. "A heap of bad luck."

"Do they live in this swamp?" she asked.

"Yes, the schoolhouse is right in the swamp. Good thing too or the whole thing woulda gone in the forest fire last year. The swamp was what saved 'em." They drove on in silence except for the clatter of the logs and Louise held on with both hands.

"There it is," the driver said.

Looking, she saw a mound rising in the swamp, the trees a little taller, a small clearing with a hedge of trees around it, cut by a single opening, the one through which they were entering. She saw within the clearing a squat tar-papered shack, and a box-like building painted white. The latter had a red chimney. "The schoolhouse," said her informer and her heart missed a beat. But they were driving on to the shack. It was a small black-tarred house with tiny windows and a lean-to at one end. It seemed bowed with the loneliness of the marsh. Further back stood another shack. Desertion was written on its very roof. On

the right a short distance, a scant twenty yards from the house, stood the family cemetery which she would not have seen except for the home-made picket fence that surrounded each grave. "Fences to keep them in," she thought. "Even the dead would want to get away from this place."

Four lean hounds, wildly barking, leapt at the sleigh as they drew up, frantic at the sight of strangers. Their commotion brought all the Lindstroms to the door of their shack, where they stood unsmiling. There must have been at least five children peering from around the man and the woman. The woman came out with them all clinging to her skirts. The faces emerged like a tide, one breaking upon the last, and the sleigh stopped in front of their peering eyes. She had had the same impression seeing a family of gophers alert on their haunches looking at her from their remote world. They were looking at her from a region unknown to her. They had known things she had never known. Even the baby in the woman's arms had knowledge she hadn't. She wanted to hide but she sat paralyzed hearing her driver say,

"Here we are Miss, get out."

Still in a maze she found herself standing on the hard, still frozen ground with both feet like stubs. Vaguely, distantly she heard the driver say to Mr. Lindstrom, "Got to be hurrying along. The corduroy's getting softer all the time. Don't want to lose my horse the way you did yours." Vaguely she knew he was going, but she could not cry out, "Stop. Wait. I'm going back with you."

She felt she must say it but she could not turn. She was looking straight into the naked blue eyes of the woman, Mrs. Lindstrom. The woman kept looking straight at her and smiling shyly and sadly, and she saw children swarming like an oncoming sea around the long skirts. The woman was leaning out of the crowd of children and gazing at the young girl with her naked blue eyes. What had those eyes seen? The girl shuddered seeing what was in them, and she could not take her eyes away.

She saw Mrs. Lindstrom swaying forward like a gnarled tree in a wind. She felt the warm rough hand on her, just a shy fleeting touch as though she had wanted to see if she were real. "I'm glad you've come, Teacher," she said and dropped back amidst her children.

"I'm Miss Evans," she said timidly and she would not have been

surprised if all of them had shouted back, "Oh no, you're Louise. You're not grown up."

But through all the harrowing days that were to follow and through which she thought she could not live, they called her nothing but Teacher.

She tried to count the confusion of tangled blonde heads as they fought for the safest places around the woman's long black skirt. She tried idiotically to count them, but they changed like quicksilver and besides they looked as much alike as chipmonks with their snarled yellow heads, their pale Scandinavian faces. She counted five girls and then saw two lanky older girls standing by the corner of the shack with wild timid faces. They could not have been much older than herself and an awful longing made her go toward them but they turned and ran like wild creatures and peered out from the far corner of the shack, grinning.

"They have to get used to you, Teacher, we don't see nobody in here," Mrs. Lindstrom apologized in her sweet sad monotone. Her voice was so strange that Louise stood listening to it as if it spoke to her of something she could not quite make out. "Gust'll take your trunk to the schoolhouse. We don't have room to sleep you here, we eat you!"

Louise laughed hysterically. She was blindly following events, finding herself half way to fulfill an action before she thought of it. It all gave her an eerie impression of nothing matching. She saw suddenly Mr. Lindstrom and wondered why she had not noticed him before. He stood looking hurt. He was important. She knew that by the very way he stood on his two feet. He was eyeing her as if he could measure with his eyes her ability to teach. He kept looking at her as if to impress her that he knew a good teacher when he saw one.

His face had become fixed and unhappy as if he never quite had room in the shack to change his expression. Now he was lifting her trunk into a wheelbarrow and for a moment she had a crazy sense of incongruity; then she remembered that he was going to take it to the schoolhouse. Then she remembered that perhaps ten minutes before she had actually seen the schoolhouse, standing in the clearing, then she found herself stumbling over the stumps after Mr. Lindstrom who was pushing her new and shining trunk on the wheelbarrow. At the station

it had looked like a friend but now it looked disconnected, as if filled with nothing.

Then, turning her head, she saw the horse and sleigh going back over the corduroy. With its disappearance she felt something gruesome was in the air, that the stark trees were a menace, that she was cut off forever. It was too late to shout for anybody now. Now she had nothing to say. This must be it, the thing which her parents feared for her. This was why—but no use thinking. Nothing could stop it now.

The door was about to be opened. She stood back. Mr. Lindstrom stopped on the steps, the key in his hand, "I'm the main one on the school board," he said. Mrs. Lindstrom came with the children and stopped a ways off behind her. They all seemed to nod with Mr. Lindstrom's importance.

"How many children are there?" she asked, fingering her new purse.

"You'll be kept busy," he said, coughing, turning to open the door; but she said,

"The teachers,—why didn't they stay on . . . don't they?" But he pretended not to hear. "This lock is rusty," he said, shaking the door, as though the unused door might tell something, might expose the secret that hung in the air.

"I'm the main one on the school board," he said turning about suddenly as though to catch her unaware, to find her secretly belittling his importance. "There are two others, but they live so far it ain't no use for them to come. We run things to suit ourselves and *me,*" he eyed her narrowly. "Me, I like to have a good yob done." He threw open the door. "My kids need school same as city kids. I ask every night, 'What you learn today?' and they tell me. We got a good school here. I pick everything out myself."

The unaired school room odor was intensified by the layers of dust which Mr. Lindstrom kept furtively wiping off with his hands. He led the way into an adjoining room, "Here's where you sleep." She looked down on a narrow bed covered with a home-made straw tick. There was a shelf nailed feebly to the wall of plasterboard. Mr. Lindstrom's voice went on and on.

"We charge ten dollars a month for board, that's cheap enough. Teacher we had before didn't eat a single meal in our house even to

show she was friendly. She was a mean one, I tell you. A Finn. Finns are mean like that. Not one of us spoke a word to her for two weeks before she left. She cooked her meals here." He pointed to a kerosene stove and three blackened pans on the wall.

It couldn't be true. No one could possibly live like that, and without being spoken to!

"She was a mean one," Mr. Lindstrom said as they went back to the school room. "I just figgered out if she didn't like to board with us, she could find out how it was to be alone!"

She noticed now that the frisky Adam's apple which had held her attention had stopped.

He stood at the door looking at her out of his little narrow eyes. "Well, I'll leave you here," he said. "You come down later." And he went out mumbling.

Louise ran to the window and stood on tiptoe looking out, seeing Mr. Lindstrom go across the clearing to the shack. She felt her eyes glazing over as she stared and saw it was getting dark rapidly as if the darkness came in from the underworld like a tide. Could it be possible they expected her to unpack? There stood her trunk beside the dilapidated bed. "I'll go down and tell him," she thought. "Tell him I'm sick. I must go home at once. I can walk. I can run over the corduroy." Her family would laugh, of course, but then she was a joke to them. She would go right back to school and then find a job nearer home, in a small town. . . .

She stood on tiptoe looking out the little high window. The sun sank as if weary of looking down on so desolate a spot, sank without giving notice, suddenly, behind the jackpines. She shuddered with cold and fear and clutching her coat about her she ran toward the shack stumbling over the stumps, fearing to look into the face of the approaching night.

No one was outside the shack. It seemed bitter cold. She saw at the window the white faces of the children watching for Teacher. The dark seemed at her back. To her relief the door opened and Mrs. Lindstrom stood in the lamp light.

"Come in, Teacher," she said in that sweet sad voice. "I'm making supper." Louise stooped to enter the low doorway, peering about in the

uncertain light for place to set foot where there was not a small child or an interested dog.

Pork was frying on the stove, and Mrs. Lindstrom puttered about with that complete disorganization that goes with a mind somewhere else. From a box nailed to the wall she produced a knife, a cup, putting them on as though not quite certain she had done the right thing.

"Where is Mr. Lindstrom?" Louise asked, sitting gingerly on an old box.

"He's in the barn, Teacher." They all were looking at her anxiously. She knew they had lots too many teachers not to know something of what was going on in her mind; and she felt the conflict as though it had been carried on in so many words. She must tell Mr. Lindstrom that she had to get away, that she could not sleep in that iron bed with the tick.

The door opened and he came in with a forbidding frown. She started to speak, to say, "I really am not well." But the words did not some. Instead she said, "Can I do anything to help? I always help at home." Mrs. Lindstrom had given the oldest girl, Sena, a battered pan and told her to get potatoes out of the lean-to. "I'll go with you," Louise said. The two girls gave a start. Mrs. Lindstrom caught her arm, "Wait. Wait." The others seemed to pause in an instant that held something they knew and she did not. She looked from one face to another, then around the small shack, at Mr. Lindstrom who had lowered his eyes and was looking down at the children on the floor; and then at Mrs. Lindstrom who stood with an amazement of sorrow in her face, as if she could not stand any more, know any more.

"Better not go in there," the woman said. Sena and Ida moved toward the door to the lean-to and stood tight together as if barring her, their eyes big with some unknown terror.

"I shouldn't?" she stammered.

Mrs. Lindstrom shook her head and wiped her eyes, and went back to the stove weeping. Ida and Sena went into the lean-to and came creeping back quickly with the potatoes. Louise sat down on the box, her legs weak. It seemed there was nothing to say. The black door led straight before her into the lean-to. What was there? Why didn't they want her to go in there?

Ida and Sena put some boards over two boxes and covered them

with an old cotton quilt. Upon this they ate their supper, the children lined solemnly on one side. Louise was on the other.

"Try to eat, Teacher," Mrs. Lindstrom begged from the end of the "table." "We don't have things swell up here like you do in town, but I try all I can." She could have gained little from trying, for the pork, to begin with, was rancid, the potatoes had been frosted, and their cow had been dry for months, but the children didn't seem to care as long as the coffee held out. They kept peeking over the edges of their tin cups. Sena passed the bread, shaking with anxiety, holding the plate carefully. The bread looked grey, unporous, as if it had never seen yeast.

But Louise could not get anything past the lump in her throat. She kept thinking she would ask Mr. Lindstrom to help her to Deep Gorge, but something about his jaw proclaimed as loudly as though he had spoken, "I'm through fooling with teachers. My kids have a right to an education and I'm going to see that they get it." He seemed to be glaring at her across the table compelling her to hold her tongue about leaving.

"You'll hear wolves tonight," he said cheerfully.

"Wolves?"

"Yah, they're half starved and I pity anyone who gets in their way." He watched her terror with satisfaction but not until he had helped himself to some more blackened potatoes did he say, "They don't come into the clearing. They hang around the swamp, near the corduroy."

"I won't ask him tonight," she thought. "In the morning I'll get him to help me to the gravel road. Someone can come back for my trunk."

"Your school will be smaller than the other teacher had it," Mrs. Lindstrom said wiping her eyes, and all the eyes turned as one pair towards the doorway from which they had kept her before.

What could it mean, that nameless absorbing terror? There was the black rising doorway, leading where? She was afraid to ask, afraid to look at all those stricken eyes. They might cease speaking to her at all, or refuse to loan her a lantern to get to the schoolhouse. Terror of a nameless kind distorted the smile she had planned to use as she turned to Mr. Lindstrom.

"Please will you let Ida and Sena sleep with me tonight? You see, I've never . . ." she could not go on.

"Well, we're plenty crowded here," he said. "Better go along, girls."

She looked at the two girls who seemed to shrink so that it hardly seemed they would be of any assistance against the terrors of the schoolhouse.

"Couldn't I sleep here?" she tried to say.

"No, no, no," Mrs. Lindstrom said, motioning with her eyes to the family, including the door to the lean-to, her hand over her mouth. Again she caught the agitation that shook over the family, making them as one man, one organism.

They seemed to be eager to have her out of the house. With one hand Mr. Lindstrom snatched a few covers from the pallet on the floor, lighted the smoky lantern and motioned Louise and the two girls to follow. They went out into the pitch darkness. Louise felt the claw-like hands of Ida and Sena in hers. The jackpines had fallen into the darkness. There was nothing but the small wavering circle of light which they followed. She stopped in terror as something scuttled past.

"Only a porcupine," Mr. Lindstrom said as if in disgust.

He took them to the door, gave them the lantern and then he said something that astonished her.

"Well, it's a nice late Spring we're having."

And the girls' faces looked happy. Why should they be happy at a late Spring?

They went into the bleak schoolhouse holding the lantern high. The room where they were to sleep looked small in the eerie light.

"We sleep cross-wise," Sena said and sat down removing her shoes and her dress. Both of them were sewed in their underwear for the winter. Louise covered the straw tick with the tattered quilts. It would have to do.

"We sleep with our clothes on, it's warmer," Ida said.

So she laid down in her clothes. It gave her a sense of security. "Do the wolves *ever* come this far?"

Ida shook her head.

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Sometimes," Sena said. "We're glad you've come, Teacher."

Louise put her hands over her face trying to shut out their thin wistful looks. She felt again the terror she had felt when they barred her from the lean-to. What was it that made the bottom drop out and leave them all staring like that over a chasm of horror at something they could not stop, or mitigate? A wolf howled, a long lifted articulation of that terror. She shivered in every limb wondering what they were peering at, what was beyond that closed door. She could not possibly keep the words back.

"What is it, Sena?"

Sena, sitting on the bed, suddenly distorted her face and, without covering it, began to cry.

Louise was abashed, wishing she had not spoken. She saw in that amazement with which she watched everything happen, that Ida was asleep, her head rolled back on her pipe-stem neck. She drew back from the weeping Sena, who sat bolt upright on the bed, the tears dropping from her wide empty blue eyes. She was surprised to hear herself say, "What's in the lean-to?" She could not help asking. The horror had become almost a fascination, a pleasure. "Sena, tell me."

Sena looked at her in the lantern glow.

"What is it, Sena?" She was whispering.

Sena said, "Little Arttur . . ." in a high lisping voice that seemed utterly without meaning. Then she began to weep so bitterly that she did not speak to her again.

Morning, which came promptly enough at home, deferred its arrival, and Louise didn't fall asleep until a late, late dawn. All night the wolves howled like a pitiful and uncontrollable sobbing. She had left the lantern burning. She wakened with a start, sitting bolt upright saying "Little Arttur, Little Arttur." What could it mean? The two tow-headed little girls still slept, their heads hanging over the side of the bed. Louise felt cramped and cold. She crept out of bed, blew out the lantern, tip-toed to the high window. A thick fog ran along the ground amidst the stems of the trees like the breath of some invisible beast. A thin smoke rose from the tin stove-pipe of the shack. She felt eyes upon her and, whirling, saw Ida and Sena staring at her.

"Good morning," she said, putting on her robe of school teacher poorly.

They both smiled faintly instead of answering. She thought she would go mad if they didn't speak. "How can I get a letter home?" she asked turning back to the window. She found she got better answers if she didn't look at them.

"Pa goes once a week to town," Sena said, drawing on her shoes.

"What day? What day?" Louise asked and she thought they would never answer.

"Today. Yah, today," Ida said. "Yah today for the Swedish paper and grub."

Her heart gave a leap. She would write. She would say she wanted to come back, that they had been right after all. She was too young, this was too awful. She was relieved as if the decision had taken her half way home.

"Who lives in that far house?" she asked.

"The Berglands," Sena said in her sweet high voice. "They're dead!" The sweet voice sent a thrill of horror through Louise. "Yah, Mrs. Bergland killed her man with a butcher knife." She shook her hair playfully over her face looking through with her fey blue eyes. "She was lonesome. She told Ma to kill Pa too and get away from here but Ma didn't do it."

Louise was aghast. She saw the bright bird-like face and then heard the words, they didn't go together. "They came and took the kids away," Ida said. "Now it's kind lonesome."

"You mean there aren't any more children but you and Sena and your sisters?" Louise asked.

"That's all," Sena said.

"And Little Arttur," Ida said, and Sena put her finger to her lips.

Louise couldn't even speak. They went out into the cold morning.

"It's colder," Ida said.

"It's much colder," Sena said. "Mama will be glad."

And Mr. Lindstrom had said, "There'll be a late Spring."

"Why will they be glad?" Louise said.

But Sena only put her finger to her lips again. "Come on to eat now," she said.

Within the shack there was excitement. Mrs. Lindstrom stood amidst children over the smoke of burning bacon. Hungry as she was,

Louise felt she could not eat staring at the door into the lean-to. She sat down on the far wall against a long box. Mrs. Lindstrom looked at her with excitement, with a look at once beseeching and commanding as if the woman asked of her youth and offered her own maturity in exchange. It confused the young girl and at the same time gave her an assurance as if the woman knew her, had gone along a road that she was following. Besides she felt the motherliness as Mrs. Lindstrom dabbed at her children, turned the bacon, ordered the meagre household. It was the same gesture, after all, her own sumptuous mother made.

Mr. Lindstrom still slept on the old bed. He got up fully dressed.

Mrs. Lindstrom held the baby over her hip frying the bacon. "Did you sleep?" she asked. "I couldn't sleep either at first. The wolves. Now I can't sleep when they're quiet. Funny ain't it, Teacher?" She spoke in that high cryptic voice, unhuman. "We've got an egg for you, Teacher," she said. "Didn't you hear our hen?" She held it up preciously between her thumb and finger.

"Sure you must eat it," Mr. Lindstrom said, "or you can't teach. Today we will have teaching," he said importantly to the children. They all nodded together.

"How do you want it?" Mrs. Lindstrom said, and she saw them all smiling at her. She felt dizzy and she wanted to say, "Boiled," but she couldn't say it and lost consciousness. When she opened her eyes they were all bending over her pouring marsh water on her face.

"My, you scared us, Teacher," Mrs. Lindstrom said. "You must eat."

Louise scrambled up frightened. She had never fainted before.

"It's hard to be homesick," Mrs. Lindstrom said.

"We ain't going to take no more teachers back," Mr. Lindstrom said.

"Could you take . . . could you take . . . a letter?" she asked.

"Well, I ain't going to take any letter about going away," he said.

"Guss!" said Mrs. Lindstrom sharply. "Of course he'll take a letter, Teacher."

"I just want to say I'm all right," Louise lied.

"It's turned cold again," Mr. Lindstrom said as they sat down to breakfast.

"The ground won't be thawing for another month," Mrs. Lindstrom said, brightening.

"A month," said Mr. Lindstrom.

Her face fell; all the children reflected her expression, watching her anxiously. They all fell silent and it seemed a presence was coming into the room from the lean-to. Louise sat with her back to the door and she could hardly keep from screaming and leaping up to face what was coming through the door. "Little Arttur. Little Arttur." Who was he? She looked around and saw all the bland smitten faces, smudged with the same horror. She felt she knew absolutely nothing, that she was a babe in arms, and they knew every kind of suffering. She wanted to run out and hide forever from what was on their faces.

Mrs. Lindstrom suddenly began to cry just as Sena had. "It'll come," she said. "It'll come." Her thin, haggard body swayed. "Nothing can stop it. It'll come."

Louise felt a slow horror creep up her spine as she sat riveted, looking at the iron gnarled body of the woman, the hands dried as if burnt in some fire, and the face ravaged by emotions and passions strange to her. She sat blank, looking from one face to another, and the baby began slowly to howl as if its primordial throat expressed the grief they could not. Mrs. Lindstrom did not pick it up, as if she knew nothing could be done. They all sat together woven in some awful pattern which they would never see.

Mr. Lindstrom got up and walked through the room and out the door. Mrs. Lindstrom, still crying, changed the baby. The girls got up and stood awkwardly. Louise got up. Sena whispered, "Do you want to see him?" Loiuse backed off shaking her head. Mrs. Lindstrom was beckoning to her, crooking her finger as if she had something very surprising and wonderful to show her. "Do you want to see him?" she whispered.

"Who?" she said, backing away.

"Little Arttur," the woman said tenderly.

Louise pointed to the lean-to. "You mean . . . ?"

"He's as peaceful and pretty as the day he died," Mrs. Lindstrom said. Her face was ecstatic. "For eight years I waited for a son. I had five girls and then Little Arttur."

The girls stood apologetic, their eyes downcast.

"How old?" Louise managed to say.

"Three year," the woman said. "Let me show you."

"No. No." Louise was pale with terror. "No. No."

"Oh, he looks so pretty," she said, doting. She seemed like a woman enamoured, infatuated.

Louise pulled back away from the claw-like-hands. "No. No!"

"Sometime, Teacher. He's so pretty."

"Sometime," Louise mumbled.

"Oh, you are so nice." Mrs. Lindstrom touched her arm shyly. "Such nice clothes."

Louise turned and ran out of the house into the cold air. The frosty air meant something to her now. She knew now why they didn't want Spring to come. She shivered in the cold air. She ran to the schoolhouse and shut the door, then she saw Ida, Sena, and three other girls coming across the clearing, like pale little lambs. They came in and she began to sharpen pencils.

"Teacher," Ida said, "Ma said Pa will take your letter."

Pretending to look into a book while they were at their writing lesson, she wrote to her mother:

"Oh, mother, please send me the money to come home," she poured out the horror of the lean-to and the menace of the oncoming Spring, "and just as soon as it thaws, mother, they will have to bury him. She waited eight years. . . . His name is . . . they call him 'Little Arttur.' Oh, mother, don't let me see that, don't let me stay. Don't let me stay. There will come that day, it will be warm and I'll have to see it. . . ."

Without reading it she folded it up and put it in an envelope whose pinkness and fragrance seemed silly to her now.

The noon meal was an exact repetition of the others, without the egg for her; rancid bacon, black coffee, black frost-bitten potatoes, soggy bread. She held up her letter.

"You're sure it ain't nothing about going back?" Mr. Lindstrom said.

"Oh, no, no," she lied, "just my mother . . ."

He went directly lunch was done and Mrs. Lindstrom came with them to the schoolhouse and sat sewing an old coat while Louise nervously told her stories about knights and fair ladies, feeling silly before

the naked blue eyes and Mrs. Lindstrom's gaze striking her bare to the bone.

Then Mrs. Lindstrom started to talk in her high sing-song about how much better they had been in Duluth, how they had come out to a "homestead," after all the good ones were gone. All their savings from ten years had been used to buy the cows, chickens and the two horses that had broken their legs. Interweaving through her tale was "Little Arttur," the reality of realities to her. "He fell down and hurt his stomach on a stump," and she told over and over in that folk rhythm of their waiting to send for a doctor, what everyone had said, how he had looked. She had it all treasured minutely. "It's been too cold to dig him in and then when it got thawed a little we'd got kind of used to having him in the lean-to. I wanted to have the Lutheran preacher too but we can't now count of no horses. Now Gust says we must dig him in. I can't stand it. I can't stand it. . . ." Her voice didn't change, she just rocked holding the old coat to her.

The barking of the hounds announced Mr. Lindstrom's return and everyone ran out to see what he had brought. The supplies were meagre and he looked enigmatical about the letter but it was gone from his his pocket. He seemed to be a person of importance having been as far as Deep Gorge. Whoever sat in the only chair leaped from it when he entered, the dogs hunched in behind and fled to the rear of the stove, the children were quiet. But the meal was the same except for lumps of sugar through which everyone sucked their coffee.

"Can't you go it, Teacher?" asked Mrs. Lindstrom.

Louise shook her head dumbly. The sight of the lean-to door terrified her. And she was frightened, fearful Mr. Lindstrom had not mailed her letter.

"Maybe tomorrow you can eat, Teacher," Mrs. Lindstrom said, sighing.

They talked in their sweet, sweet voices. "If you could see him just once. The little girls love to look at their brother, too."

She had to leave, go out and lean weakly against the shack.

Another night of terror followed, made terrible by the gnawing of the porcupines right beneath their room, sharp vice-like teeth eating through the wood. Louise sat up all night, her eyes wide. Mrs. Lindstrom had said, "You could sleep in here on that box, Teacher." But

she preferred this to being near the lean-to, fearful as it was. Ida and Sena dropped immediately to sleep. Her terror was worse than the previous night because added to the physical terror there was the other terror, of "Little Arttur" and the fear that she would never be equal to "Life," that she was a coward, a failure.

She counted the hours. *If* he mailed the letter her mother would get it in Minneapolis the next day. Nobody would bring a wire over the corduroy, she gave that up. It suddenly dawned on her that in any case there would be no answer for a week, not until Mr. Lindstrom went in to get it and then he might not give it to her. At last she snatched a bit of sleep when the wolves went away and the porcupines ceased gnawing.

Every day that followed was a nightmare to Louise. How could they stand it? Every day there was a new sign of Spring. She knew that every morning Mrs. Lindstrom stood at the door holding out her hand, testing the warmth of the sun.

She could not sleep. The black nights were terrible with their wolf echo. She could not eat. It told on her. Her own pleasant world had shifted. She felt plunged into their lives, into the cruelty, the dread monotony. She felt as if their sorrows were being wrenched through her. She thought she had never felt anything. Her life had been a pleasant little stream, without meaning except its pleasure and now there was all this. You came around a bend in the road and there was all this. . . . This was what people knew was in life. This was the world her mother had dreaded for her to find.

The pale sun shone in a horror all day, getting warmer and warmer. She counted off the days until the next mail day. She must get away. She was afraid of knowing all this. She might never be the same again. It was like being murdered.

Mrs. Lindstrom came every afternoon to the schoolhouse and sat listening to the lessons, then she would go back to the shack and Louise knew she was in the lean-to. At supper she would be very pale and exalted and go out and look at the circles around the moon. Often she talked of "Little Arttur." They thought of him as alive as long as he was in the lean-to. Louise listened feeling she was looking into a woman's life. This was what it was to be a woman, bound to one's fate, hand and foot to sorrow.

It was getting warmer and there was something forcing its attention upon all of them. No one mentioned it but they all stayed away from the house. No one could even think of it but even the children and the dogs stayed away from the house as much as possible.

Louise felt the warmth of the sun with horror. One more day until mail day. She would surely hear from her mother and she would go right away. She would walk to Deep Gorge. Just one more day but that day was warm, the sun rose hot and naked and the ground was soft. A bird sang, drippling down his notes from the tree and no one could deny the warmth of the sun. Mr. Lindstrom sat outside the shack whittling and not speaking. The girls mooned around. Everyone could hear Mrs. Lindstrom crying inside the shack. Louise stood outside. She could not go away. The girls hovered near her.

Sena said, "Teacher, maybe you could stop her."

Louise looked down at the blue uplifted eyes. But what could she do, what did she know? She didn't know anything. She had never even seen a dead person. Sena was pushing her, urging. She found herself in the dark cabin, and there was Mrs. Lindstrom distraught, as if she had been startled, standing in the door of the lean-to. "Gust says we must dig him in," she said in her high plaintive voice that didn't go with her face or the circumstance. "How can I live when I can't look at him every day?" There was no one to answer that question.

Louise stood helpless and remote and slightly repulsed by the grotesque woman, distorted from grief and child-bearing, from having life pass through, beyond her. She felt a repulsion from the strong scarred body that had the sign of stress beyond bearing upon it, of compulsion beyond imagining. "Don't cry, Mrs. Lindstrom," she said, awkward and polite. But the woman kept crying, standing with her dirty apron lifted.

Mr. Lindstrom stood in the door apologetically as if he must make up to his wife for something, for the plan of the universe. He said, looking at his hands, "You get him ready, mama." He went out again and they heard the shovel scrape and clang.

The girls came to the doorway their eyes in fright searching the face of their mother like lost mariners at sea, searching for a sign. They seemed to draw an answer from the distraught woman. She began to move around the room "fixing things." She came back to her endless

world of things. "We haven't got no preacher," she said. "We must fix up some. I got his best clothes. Teacher, you help them get their faces clean."

Louise helped wash the stricken faces and she wished she could wash their hair. For the first time she felt she liked them as she brushed back their hair from the frightened faces, that were like her own. Would all these be women too and know grief and be warped and stricken and tempered? Would things happen to them of which they guessed nothing, would there be terror and fright? She cried out. She felt her mouth in a continuous O of grief. But no one paid any attention.

She must get out of there. She must never see *that*. She could not finally see. She must run away, hide, not let it happen to her. She must stay virginal and unknowing. She said hysterically, "I'm going to the schoolhouse. I feel this is your private . . . I can't see. I can't see."

Mrs. Lindstrom paused amidst her labors preparing for death and looked up. "I can't . . . don't you see," Louise said, ashamed, as if she was asking them to bear the brunt of some universal fact she could not help them bear. "You see my mother wouldn't even let me see my grandmother when she . . . I've never seen. . . ." Then, crying, she ran out and running over the clearing saw that motion of Mr. Lindstrom which no one can mistake, and heard the clang of that metal in the soil. She saw the small figure bending, tossing, making a space. She ran into the schoolhouse shutting, locking, barricading the door as if she could shut it out. . . .

And in the tiny bedroom she knew that she could never shut it out, there was no door, there was no barricade. . . . "Oh, how can anybody bear it! Can't somebody stop it. . . ." She threw herself on the bed lying tense, coiled away so that it might pass her by unnoticed, but she was listening. . . . She did not know how long she lay there. She saw the shadow of the sun fall across and move and she knew she was listening for some sound. What were they doing, what was going on? She could not stay closed in. Against her will she was drawn to the high window where she stood on tip-toe trembling. She kept her eyes closed and felt the chill air from the ground, then she opened them and looked.

What she saw she never forgot. What courage, what understanding foreshadowed her coming years was cast forward from that moment in an intensity that is only generated like heat or electricity at crucial

moments when the insulation is broken and contact is made for a moment with a great current, for an instant generating a current that runs an entire life.

She saw them standing around the space looking down.

She saw the fair girls looking from their passivity like angels looking down dreaming, not yet involved in their flesh, their faces clean and shining and wonder new upon them. She saw Mr. Lindstrom and he was washed clean and had on a tie and a pair of glasses that caught the light and glistened so he looked blind.

But what she really saw was the mother standing looking down, her body the body of woman bearing the mortal flesh and not seeing it corruptible or momentary, embodying her dreams of eternity. And Louise knew in that moment she was to be a woman too. Her body in that old senseless dress spoke what it had spoken that first moment and after, of the mystery of bearing, the subtle loveliness of sufferance.

They all stood awkwardly in that moment where there is something between one world and another. Then Mr. Lindstrom tucked in his tie so it wouldn't swing and began filling in the grave. Mrs. Lindstrom put out her hand as if the dirt fell on her, then she stood still. The sun had gone and there was anti-climax and chill and desertion.

The woman held her baby in her arms, the youngest swirling around her skirts; and she seemed to pull up from them, from the earth, her head swirling up out of the earth, out of flesh, out of her own breast.

Louise was crying. She pressed against the window, on her toes, looking, seeing them for the first time. She loved them more than her own family. She felt she loved them really. . . .

Sena was calling softly, "Teacher. Teacher, open the door."

Louise flew to open it, and took the little girl in her arms, frantically kissing her and stroking back her hair. Sena put her arms around the taller girl and they stood close together.

"Ma says come to supper."

They walked hand in hand through the timber to the house.

Everything seemed different inside the shack. Mrs. Lindstrom moved softly getting supper. There was tenderness in the room. The children were muted with strangely shining faces. Mr. Lindstrom said,

"Hello, Teacher." He still had on his tie but he had taken off his glasses.

They all laughed together at supper, touching hands, touching feet shyly, passing plates. Louise made jokes, laughing, telling about her brothers and sisters, her mother. They looked at her, delighted with her, only half understanding what she said.

"Time for bed," Louise said, "Couldn't I please sleep on this box?" They were happy to have her. They all slept in the same room. She slept soundly for the first time since she had been there.

The next day Louise busily washed all their heads and they came out like beaming dandelion tops, shouting at each other, "Jello top! Jello top!" They played for the first time.

"You won't leave us, Teacher, will you?" they asked, suddenly fearful.

"Heavens, no!" said Louise. "I'll stay until you are all grown up. Every single one of you!"

That afternoon Mr. Lindstrom brought a letter from her mother. It read:

> Dear Zagge: We are all so sorry that you seem to have fallen in an uncongenial place. I hope you remember that we all strongly advised you to finish your course at Teacher's College, so you wouldn't have to start your teaching career quite so far back.
>
> You dear child, how you do exaggerate and make everything sound so funny (all but your story of the dead child which could not possibly be true).
>
> The next time you write do tell us exactly how things are up there.
>
> Your loving Mother.
>
> P. S.: Grandfather says to tell you that he wanted to come home from the Civil War too!

MY MOTHER'S GOOFY SONG

by

John Fante

MY MOTHER does not believe I got arrested for stealing carbide. I try to prove it and try to prove it, but she does not believe me. It does not do any good to talk to her.

This is how it happened. Me and Dibber got arrested on Sunday, right after Church let out. We had paper sacks. We went behind the Colorado Miner's Supply Company. We hid in the high weeds in the alley. Nobody was looking, so I threw a brick through the back window. It made an awful racket, just like when a brick goes through a window. Me and Dibber got pretty scared. Nobody came, though.

Me and Dibber climbed through the busted window. Right there was the carbide in big black drums. The drums weighed five hundred pounds apiece, so we could not get away with one of them very well. Even if we could get away with one of them, we would have to break down the door. Even if we did break down the door, we would have to carry the drum home, and it was too heavy. Even if we did carry the drum home, we would not know where to hide it. Even if we did know where to hide it, we would have too much carbide. So we filled the paper sacks.

We did not hear a sound. But just when we got through, Mr. Krasovich came into the back room from the front part of the store. He is not very much to be scared of. Oh no! Not much! He only owns the store; that's all.

He said, "Just a minute, boys."

Dibber tried to jump through the window. Mr. Krasovich grabbed him by the pants. He had me by the necktie; I always wear a necktie on Sundays. I was not trying to get away, though.

He said, "Come with me, boys."

He took us into his front office. He called on the telephone. He did not call anybody very important. Oh no! Not very important! He only called the cops; that's all. He hung up. He swung around in his chair and looked at me and Dibber. He thought he was tough.

Dibber said, "If you will leave us go, Mr. Krasovich, we will promise not to steal from you any more. We will promise."

Mr. Krasovich said, "No, boys. I am going to send the two of you to the State penitentiary." But he could not scare me and Dibber with that kind of talk. Me and Dibber are not so dumb as you think.

He sat there like he was the big cheese himself. We did not want his old carbide, anyway. All we wanted was two little bitty paper sacksful to blow the corks out of bottles.

Then Mr. Wagner, the speed cop, drove up with his motorcycle. Oh! Oh! The minute I saw him, I knew I was in for it. He is not very important. He does not know anybody very important. Oh, no! He only knows my father; that's all. Mr. Wagner and my father both belong to the Elks. After he found out what happened, Mr. Wagner said the cops would send us both to the penitentiary for fifteen years.

He took us out to his motorcycle and made us both get into the side car. I was crying a little, but not much. So was Dibber, and a whole lot. You would too. Mr. Wagner stepped on the starter, and the motorcycle started.

Mr. Krasovich hollered, "Well, goodbye, boys. And lots of luck to you!" He is one of those wise guys. He thought he was funny.

Mr. Wagner drove us through town to the courthouse. People kept looking at us. I was glad I was on the bottom. Nobody saw me. Dibber was on my lap. The whole town saw him. He must have felt very cheap and freaky.

Mr. Wagner took us downstairs and put us in the jailhouse. We were the only ones in the jailhouse. We did not try to escape or anything. It is a very fine jailhouse. Nobody ever did escape from it. Once though, three crooks did. Mr. Wagner then went upstairs and telephoned our fathers. He told them to come over right away.

While me and Dibber were waiting for what was going to happen next, we took out our knives and cut our names in the wall. We copied from other names on the wall. We copied the best. If you are ever put in that jailhouse, you will see our names. Look over by the window.

You will see Dibber's cut this way: "Kansas City Lannon."

I cut mine: "Two-Gun Toscani, The Death Kid."

Pretty soon, Dibber's father came to the court house. He was as mad as everything. He was yelling when he came down the stairs.

He hollered, "Where is he? Where is he?" Meaning Dibber.

Mr. Wagner opened the jailhouse door, and Mr. Lannon ran in. He made a hard run for Dibber. He bent Dibber over the cot. And right there in front of me and Mr. Wagner he gave Dibber the worst licking I ever heard anybody get, except me. Old Dibber must have felt very cheap. I mean: you know how it is.

Then he quit licking Dibber, and took him home. He pulled him up the stairs by the ear. I heard Dibber hollering away up in the corridor, and even when they got out in the yard, and even when they crossed the street. It was tough on Dibber, but he got off easy.

After a little while, my father came down the stairs. He was not in the least bit of a hurry. Mr. Wagner opened the jailhouse door, and my father came in real slow.

He said, "So you're a thief, too, are you?"

I said, "No, Papa. I'm not a thief on purpose."

He said, "Purpose! By God, I'll show you some purpose."

Oh, but that Dibber got off real easy to what I got. Oh, but it hurt. Oh, my father gave it to me with his belt. My father wears a belt because he likes to show off. I mean: What is the use to wear a belt if you are already wearing suspenders? I call that showing off. My father hurt all the worse on account of my father is a bricklayer, and if you think bricklayers do not hurt, just feel my father's muscle. My pants hurt and hurt and hurt. What I mean is: they burned like a stove.

After my father got tired of licking me, he pushed me into the corner and put his belt back on.

He said, "When you get home, tell your mother what you did, you twisted little snake. And if she doesn't knock the living devil out of you, then by God I will."

I went out of the jailhouse and up the stairs and down the corridor and out the door and down the front stairs and across the street. I started to run. I wanted to get home before my father, so my mother could give me my other licking, because if she did not, my father would give it to me again, only harder. That would be two straight from him,

and I would rather take a hundred and fifty million lickings from my mother than even half of one licking from my father.

Ho! Ho! But you should see my mother when she gives me a licking. Ho! Ho! But you should see her. It is the goofiest licking you ever saw. Ho! Ho! She hits just like a little sissified girl, and she thinks I am dying from it. I make faces and groan, and before two or three hits she feels so sorry she has to stop, and before long, *she* is the one who is crying, not me. Ho! Ho! You should see her.

I was all out of breath when I got home. My mother was in the back yard feeding the chickens. I told her what happened. I told her the honest to God truth. I told her and told her.

I said, "Mama, I swiped carbide. I got arrested. I got put in jail. Papa got me out. He gave me a licking. He says for you to give me one, too."

But she thought I was kidding. I told her and told her and told her. But she would not believe me.

She said, "You must not talk like that."

I told her to hurry and lick me. I even got a stick. She would not take it. We went into the house. I was scared about my father. He is a very fast walker. I knew he was coming. I was so scared I was sick.

But all my mother did was sit down and say, "You must not talk like that."

Then I figured out a swell way to prove it to her. I phoned Mr. Krasovich. I told him to hold the line a minute. But my mother would not talk to him.

She said, "Hang up. I won't talk to him."

I said, "Honest, Ma."

I said, "Cross my heart, Ma."

I said, "Honest to God, Ma."

I said, "God strike me dead, Ma."

Then my father came home. I heard his shoes scrape on the front porch. I was out of luck. He came in without taking off his hat.

I said to him, "Papa, Mama does not believe I got pinched, and she won't lick me. You tell her."

He said, "Sure I will . . ., later. Now you get in there." Meaning for me to get into the bedroom.

I went in there. I got it again. I got a hell of an awful licking.

by John Fante

The worst I ever got in my life, except the time I broke Allaback's window and the time I kicked my brother in the head. It was the worse I ever got. I think it was even worse than all of my lickings put together. It stung and stang and stung. Then my father threw me on the bed and went to talk to my mother.

He told my mother about it. I heard him. He told her and told her and told her. But she would not believe him. She said I was too little to steal and get arrested. That made my father get mad at my mother.

He said, "By God, you don't know what a devil that kid is." My father is right, because I sure am hardboiled.

He went out. He was so mad he slammed the door after him and busted the glass.

My mother came into the bedroom. I was still crying from the licking. I had a right to cry, because it was the worst I ever got in my life. My mother got the menthol and pulled down my pants. She did not believe me yet. The menthol felt like ice cold ice. While she was rubbing me, she tried to tell me I didn't do it. But I did, all right.

She said, "I know you didn't do it."

I said, "I know I did."

She said, "Come on, say you didn't do it."

I said, "But I did too do it."

She said, "Oh, you did not."

I said, "I did!"

She said, "No, you didn't. You can't fool your mother."

I said, "All right. If you don't believe me, go down to the jailhouse and see. You go down there, and you'll see where me and Dibber cut our names in the wall."

But she shook her head, meaning she thought I was still fooling her.

She went away, and I could hear her in the kitchen. She was singing. My mother always sings the same old song, and it is not such a hot song, either. I learned it a long time ago, when I was a little first grade punk. It is *The Farmer In The Dell.*

The right way to sing *The Farmer In The Dell* is like this:

"The farmer in the dell,

The farmer in the dell,
Heigho, the merrio,
The farmer in the dell."

That is the right way to sing it. But this is how my mother was singing it, which makes it a very goofy song:

"Oh, I know he didn't do it,
I know he didn't do it,
Heigho, the merrio,
I know he didn't do it."

She meant me. She meant I didn't do it, which is nuts, because I did do it. And if she wants proof she can go down to the jailhouse and see mine and Dibber's names cut in the wall.

Dibber cut his: "Kansas City Lannon."

I cut mine: "Two Gun Toscani, The Death Kid."

Mine is a whole lot better than Dibber's.

CONVALESCENCE

by

Kay Boyle

All the children came into the room and looked at mother lying on the bed. The four of them stood still, just inside the doorway, and looked at her. She might have been dead, so strange she seemed to them, and her mouth never opened to bid or greet them. But father had said they should go up alone to see her, for a grown person might set her to weeping, and it was better that way.

"What is it that makes her weep?" said Bindy.

"It's something to do with her nerves," said father.

"I didn't know people could be sick all summer," Bindy said.

Up they went to her room, and they might have stood so within the door forever had not the wind suddenly sprung to life and flung it closed behind them. There they were, caught in the room with her, and no way to turn. The grass blinds were fanning the sunlight in the windows. Bindy said: "Hello."

"Hello," said mother softly. And then she called out, as though in fear: "Oh. Bindy!" He dropped the hands of the others and went running to her side. She lifted her quivering arm from the bed and put it around him. He could almost make out the green night-gown in the dim room, and her rings, and her hair brushed back behind her ears.

"Oh, Bindy," said mother in her soft fearful voice. "Look at mother's fingers! Her rings are all too big for her now!"

"You're not really his mother," said Anne. She spun around on one foot in the room, elated by the burden of disaster on the air. "Only Rolly and Midge belong to you," she said spinning. Her braids swung out like two accusing fingers as she spun. Anne and Midge began to laugh together, the two of them covering their mouths to muffle their laughter in their hands. The wondrous sense of infliction set them to tittering and wavering in their little skirts in the darkened room. But

mother had been ill too long; she had no patience left for them. The stone hearts of little girls belonged, like those of perverts, in a privy world of their own.

Rolly was gone from sight, under the bed on his hands and knees, and no one gave a thought to him. Mother held Bindy's fingers tight. And "what am I going to do, Bindy?" she whispered. "I haven't any friends left. Nobody cares any more."

"I'm your friend," said Bindy. He felt her arm pressing soft around him. "I'm a good friend of yours," he said.

"But I've got so old," said mother in complaint. "The colour's all gone out of my eyes, you know, Bindy. They won't give me a looking-glass. They don't want me to see."

"Do your nerves hurt you very bad?" said Bindy.

"Oh, they hurt awfully, awfully," said mother, and her voice went suddenly blind with tears. The thought of herself so grieving, so gentle, defenseless as no other woman had ever been because of her beauty and her frailities; such thought returned like a spectre to her mind and moved unseen from one fount of pity to the next. "It hurts the worst right here, Bindy," she said, and her throat was parched with anguish. "Put your hand right here where mother's heart is and maybe you'll help it to go away."

Bindy put his hand down on her night-dress. He could feel the soft quivering life of her heart in protest, as though he held it captive in his hand.

"There're an awful lot of kinds of sickness, aren't there?" said Bindy.

"This kind has made me so old," said mother, whispering in sorrow to him. "I know what my eyes are like, and my hair coming out in handfuls all over my head, Bindy."

"I bet you'd get a prize anywhere," said Bindy. He could not bear the tears to run down her face. "I'm not fooling. I bet you'd get a prize almost anywhere for being the most beautiful woman."

Mother lifted her head up, strong from the pillow.

"Bindy, honey, do you want to do something for mother?" she said. "Just get me my looking-glass over there, so I can have a little peek at myself."

But the little girls had sped across the room to be the first at the

dressing-table. There they stood, touching one thing and then another, puzzled that they could not find it there.

"There isn't any looking-glass any more," said Anne.

"They've taken everything," mother cried out. "They've taken mother's little curved scissors, and even her nail-file, Bindy! They've taken everything that hurts as if they thought I'd hurt myself some more!"

It was then that father came in and took the hands of the little girls.

"You must come away now," he said, and he looked shyly and uncertainly at mother. "Long enough for the first time, children," said father. "Come, Bindy, son," he said. "Mother must have a rest."

Father leaned over to kiss mother's face, but she turned it sharply on the pillow.

"Oh, don't! Oh, don't!" she said in her weak grievous voice. "I'm so tired, so tired."

They went out the door with him, the two little girls and Bindy. Father closed it softly behind, and they all went soundlessly down the stairs. In a moment mother began to cry; she lay crying senselessly, weakly into her pillow. After a while, with the tears still wet on her face, she fell asleep.

A wonderful fresh darkness had come into every part of the room while she lay sleeping. When she opened her eyes, it was deep behind the chairs in the room, and hanging like a cloth flung over the table. The high-boy in the corner had a row of light brass smiles, and somewhere within the shadows was a presence. There was no sound, but she could feel its breath and its being.

"Who's in this room with me?" she said. A dew of terror had sprung out on her brow, but she spoke the words sharp and loud across the room. She could not move, but she watched the little man stand up beside her. He put out his hand to her on the bed.

"Rolly," he said, with his head cocked.

"Oh, Rolly, Rolly," breathed mother. "Oh, Rolly." But her bare limbs were shaking with cold in the sheets. "How ever did mother's baby . . ." she said, and her teeth were shaking together. It must be the heart of winter, and she would never be warm again. "Does little Rolly

want to help mother?" she said softly. "Come here, Rolly, darling," she said, "and mother will tell you what to do."

The little man came close in the darkness and she seized his hand in her fingers. He seemed like a dwarf to her, twisted and weird, with his face unseen in the gloom. "Rolly," she whispered, "now Rolly only needs to walk over to mother's bureau. You see mother's big bureau? Now just walk sweetly over to mother's big bureau and open the drawer wide." She gave him a little push with her fingers, and he sat down suddenly on the floor. "Rolly," said mother. "Rolly, dear, get up." She could not lift herself from the pillows to see. "Rolly," she said, "you don't want to make mother sad, do you? You want to do what mother tells you to do." She felt the hand of ice on her heart, and she could not shake it from her. The little man stood up in the dark, and what time of life does sense begin to come to them, she thought wildly. Is it at two years of age or three that they run and do as they are bid? "Rolly," she said, "now you want to help mother, don't you? Now run quick, quick to mother's big bureau and do just as she tells you."

Suddenly Rolly drew away in the darkness, and set off towards the window. She reared up her head on her neck, like an adder watching, peering helpless, cold, into the room that the night was blotting away. She heard Rolly strike a chair in the dark, and his voice cry out in pain.

"Oh, Rolly," said mother. "Aren't you mother's big Rolly? It didn't hurt so very much, did it now, Rolly? You're not going to cry over a silly thing like that. You must be mother's big brave boy and pick yourself up and do what she tells you."

She heard him sniff and move on the floor.

"Rolly," she whispered, with her head raised, seeking. "Rolly, where are you now?"

His hand slapped the smooth side of a wooden body.

"Here," said Rolly's small voice out of the dark.

"Yes, yes," said mother softly. "Now, pull the drawer open, Rolly." Her breath went whistling through her teeth as they chattered. She could hear the bureau drawer slowly easing wide.

"Rolly dear," said mother, "just put your little hand right down inside it, right down inside, right there next to the window where you are."

She could hear Rolly grunt as he groped in the darkness, and sud-

denly the door opened and the nurse walked straight into the room. Mother lay still on the bed and watched the nurse switch on the small blue light in the corner. Her apron hung down from her waist, as blank as paper. When she turned around she saw the baby staring at the light.

"So this is where Rolly's been all the time!" she said.

"I've been asleep," said mother in her soft weary voice. "I didn't even know."

The nurse took him up in her arms and he did not speak nor turn his head towards the deep wide bed. She bore him out the door and left it standing wide. Mother could hear her going down the hall, down, down, down the three little steps to the nursery. In a moment she would hear the water spilling warm into the bath.

The children came up the front stairs, quietly, on their toes, as father had told them they must walk now: Bindy, and Midge, and Anne passing down the hall. Mother knew the sound of each footfall as though it were a separate hammer striking. Single and blind the blows fell on her flesh, summoning her anguish from repose, striking row upon row of brass-eyed nails into the lid that closed upon exhaustion.

"Bindy," she cried out from her room. "Just Bindy. Come and see mother."

She turned her head to watch his slight, muted body come in from the hallway. Midge and Anne went whispering away.

"Bindy," she said, borrowing ease from some other time and place. "Bindy, will you get mother something out of her bureau drawer?"

He stood still for a moment, slim and shy, looking at her.

"You're getting better, aren't you?" he said.

"I'm trying hard to get better," she said, curbing the wild speed of her blood. "Oh, so hard!" If he did not make haste, the nurse might come back to the room. "Bindy, dear, just put your hand down in the corner of the drawer that's open." Bindy set down his net of shining glassy marble eyes and crossed the soft dim room.

"There's a little bottle in there, Bindy darling," said mother. "Do you find it, darling, underneath the handkerchiefs and things?"

"Yes," said Bindy. He took it out of the drawer and held it up. "It's a pretty big bottle," he said.

"That's the one, Bindy, that's it," said mother. Her hand was shaking out before her. "Now give it to me, darling." He brought it across the room to her, treading soft and careful on the matting. She reached out her own stricken hand. "It's just between you and me, isn't it, Bindy? You and I will have a secret, you see, and we won't tell nurse or daddy or anyone at all."

"All right," said Bindy. He picked up his marbles. "Maybe if you're getting better I could play marbles here?" he said.

"But your bath must be ready now," said mother. "You'd better go now, Bindy. You'd better go and see."

She held up her head, listening to his fading steps and the hop and the skip at the nursery steps, going down. Then she set her teeth hard into the cork, and out it eased with a slow sucking gasp. Her arm was quaking in the shaded light, but she tilted the bottle up and the dark rich whiskey ran scalding down. At the first taste of it, the cold went off; she could feel it floating off, like veils from her limbs, as the cold had always done. A queer heathen laughter was beginning to shake within; the stuff ran thin against the bottle's glass and burned its way deeper and deeper into her swooning flesh.

When the nursery-door opened, she flashed the bottle under the cover. But the nurse's step went past the open door and halted at the linen-closet in the hall. Mother heard her taking the towels out for the children's bath. Everything was soft and safe; the terror had been struck away, like shackles, from her wrists. Outside in the summery evening she could hear father pacing the walk below. Up and down went his steps, as if there were some distress in his soul. Up and down, walking his unrest to sleep, as if to ease its storming. What does he fear, what does he fear, thought mother, and she was shaken all over with laughter. What does he fear now that the winter has given over to spring?

After awhile the little girls came down the hall, borne gently on an odorous warm wave from the bath. She could remember the smell of the powder on their flesh, and their hair brushed shining. She lay still in the swinging circles of the bed, seeking the high-boy's smile, or flower in curtain for anchor, and listening, whether she would or no to the little girls' soft voices. This was the place allotted the grown, she thought: to eavesdrop, to watch, to spy.

"You're not my *real* sister," Anne's voice was saying. Spy on their

actions, their hands, and the drop of their skirts; spy on their talk together. The warmth of the night was beating softly, softly now onto the dark shoals of the room.

"Who am I?" said Midge, hushed in wonder. "Who am I?"

The rising sea of warmth was lapping close to the bed now.

"Bindy's not your *real* brother," said Anne. "Father was married two times. Father's not your father. Bindy and father belong all to me."

"Who am I?" said Midge, lifting her voice in wonder to wisdom. Maybe these words were the words they spoke every day to each other, in worship of the mystery, or maybe they had never spoken them before.

"I don't know who you are," said the wise voice over the open sea of darkness. "Father's not your father."

The dark tide was full now, had risen; mother could no longer stir for the weight of it creeping warm upon her flesh. She was rocked close, cradled and quiet in it.

"Where's my father?" said Midge, stopped still for ever in wonder.

"Your father's dead," Anne's voice said. There was a wondrous murmur of sound now as though Bindy and Rolly too had set sail on the creeping waters.

"Did they kill him with a knife?" said Midge. Mother could hear the paddling of the oars come close, and the keels approaching. In a moment the prows would be on her, but still she did not stir. She lay floating, her arms out, her head back, drifting.

"Give me your hand, Rolly," said Bindy. He spoke in a hard whisper across the waters.

"I don't know," said Anne. "Maybe they cut his head off." The little girls tittered with laughter. "Or maybe he was sick and died in bed like everybody."

"Maybe mother will die," said Midge.

"You fools!" whispered Bindy. "Rolly, give me your hand going downstairs."

HAMLET'S DAGGER

by

Manuel Komroff

WHAT a dusty old place! A little, neglected archive of some past forgotten culture. Here in this narrow street, hidden away from the world, was a small shop. In the window stood an odd assortment of old walking-sticks and a few bits of mended English china; but inside—everywhere—on the walls and ledges were engravings of old stage favorites and rows upon rows of little volumes, yellow with age. And through the dust on the books you could read the titles of plays of long ago. Here they had come to rest and their final curtain was a gauze of dust. And the old man in the rear of the shop seemed quite part of his dingy wares.

As I worked my way nearer him I ventured to remark that he had a very good collection of books related to the English stage.

"The stage," he said, and his deep voice filled the entire room. "The stage. Ah! Nothing remains of the old glory. Nothing." He shook back his loose white hair and his fingers trembled as he said these words. Then his ear seemed to catch the echo of his last word and in a whisper he repeated: "Nothing."

I walked about and glanced at the odd titles of many of the little books. At length I selected one and brought it back to the old man.

"Ah yes. That is part of the old glory. Do you know what they call these plays today, young fellow? Well, they call them cheap melodrama. They are out of date, out of fashion. And do you know what is in fashion? Talk. Nothing but talk. A few young snips get together before the footlights and for a whole evening they talk away until they are blue in the face. In the end you are informed that you have attended a play. And as for acting, like the snakes in Ireland, there is none. Acting is a lost art. These footlight dandies are afraid to act because they know they can't. And as for melodrama, they fear it be-

cause they think it's unreal. And can you tell me what is real? Do you think they are real or am I real?"

"I suppose you are real enough. More real than any ghost I could imagine. But I see you have evidently been on the stage yourself."

"Many years."

"Where did you last appear?"

He was silent. He did not reply to this question either because he did not want to or because . . . Instead he said: "And I could tell you, young fellow, that there is melodrama in *Hamlet,* and there is melodrama in *Macbeth,* in *Lear,* in *Othello* . . . and what are *Richard III* and all the others that lay claim to greatness? It is in melodrama that the impossible happens, that reality and plausibility are thrown to the winds and in that . . . (he tapped with his finger) . . . there lies greatness. There: on just that impossible and unreal land ride Don Quixote, and Mephistopheles. Here a jealous Moor draws his dagger, a Jew dangles his scales before a court of justice and here the conscience of an inn-keeper wrestles with an imaginary rope around his neck."

"Inn-keeper?" I inquired.

"Yes. Mathias in *The Bells.* An old melodrama—never played today. But for twenty-two years. . . . And do you think it is wrong that I should mention it together with the masterpieces of Shakespeare? Did you ever see the play?"

I could not admit that I had.

"Well, certainly, one cannot compare it to Shakespeare, but I mention it only as an example of real theatre. I mention it because it has something that is lost today. I still remember every line of that play, every move, every gesture."

"Then you acted in *The Bells?*"

Again he was silent. He shook his white head sadly and changing the subject said, "If you would like to have a cup of tea with me upstairs I could tell you more about *The Bells.*"

He locked the shop and we climbed the stair to his room.

Here at the top was a full length portrait of Hamlet. The painting was done in black and gray with a touch of dull yellow in the costume. But the eyes—the eyes stared at you and seemed to follow you as you passed. These were the eyes that had seen the ghost of his father. The legs, in the painting, were thin and spindly, the small waist constricted

by a metal belt and the hand rested on the fancy handle of a silver dagger. Below on the frame of the picture was a small brass plate with the words, "Henry Irving in Hamlet."

In the room the old man was preparing the hot water for the tea and without delay he began to tell about this old stage melodrama. But my eyes wandered round the walls, there were so many things of interest, and I did not pay very strict attention to all he said.

It was a play, it appears, adapted from a story called *The Polish Jew*. It was first produced in 1871, by Henry Irving, as *The Bells*.

"The first act," he said, "takes place in the inn. Outside snow is falling and a sudden gust blows open one of the windows and brings some crockery crashing to the floor. This is an evil omen. From the moment this crash is heard the attention of the audience is held in a grip of iron. For exactly fifteen minutes the company of players carry on preparing the entrance of the star, and at last, quite suddenly, he is before you. This is Mathias the inn-keeper. And from now on you are witness to the struggle of a soul with its conscience. He is poor. He needs money and he plots to kill the Polish Jew who is traveling in a sleigh. He is calm in his reasoning and deliberate in his action. He is impelled by a force greater than the human strength within him and soon the deed is done; the Jew's body is consumed in the flames of a lime-kiln. Now he is free from worry and now he can live. He lives. . . ."

As I listen to his words I can see on the wall a dagger that hangs suspended from a metal belt. It is silver, and the handle. . . . The very one that the artist painted in the picture of *Hamlet*. How strange.

"Now listen. Mathias lives a blameless life. He is respected in his village. He is loved by his family. He is everything a man should be but . . . the bells. The bells are ever ringing in his ears. The sleigh-bells of the Polish Jew, that haunting little off-key tinkle, is ever in his ears. And in the last act of the play, fifteen years after he has murdered the Jew, he is still harassed by that insistent melancholy, maddening, snow-in-the-air jingle of the bells."

My eyes still wander. A long sword in a black scabbard was on the wall and some framed programs with bold printing: "Royal Lyceum Theatre." And on the table before us are some silver spoons and a sugar bowl engraved with the initials, "H. I." I could resist no longer. "All these things belonged to Henry Irving!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," he said sadly. "Henry Irving. For twenty-two years I was a member of his company. We traveled everywhere; eight tours to America. Here on the wall is his dagger and there his sword. And all these things he gave me. He gave me all, — all except the one little thing I desired most."

"And what was that?"

Again for a moment he was silent, then his voice took on that deep timbre of the old-school actor. "Well, as I was saying, for twenty-two years he was haunted. . . . He waited. No, no. That's wrong. Excuse me, I do not know what I am saying. . . . For fifteen years the bells rang in his ears and in the last act he is weary unto death and he falls asleep. Then he dreams, and you see his dream through a gauze curtain. Through this opening a new scene appears before you. Here a whole court is assembled and three judges sit on a bench of justice. The clerk reads from a paper: 'Therefore the prisoner, Mathias, is accused of having, on the night of . . . assassinated the Jew Kovesky . . . to rob him of his gold.' The prisoner protests, but the chief justice asks him to answer with calmness. Mathias, rising, replies that nothing can be proved against him; but the chief justice says, 'The public voice accuses you. Answer me this. How is it that you hear the sound of bells?' At first the prisoner denies that he hears the bells but then he weakens and admits, 'It is nothing. 'Tis but a jangling in mine ears.' The court orders the scribe to write down these words. 'Yes, but I hear it in a dream.' The court again directs the scribe. 'Write, that he hears it in a dream.' The prisoner cries out furiously, 'Is it a crime to dream!' And he appeals to those assembled in the court room, 'Listen friends! . . . I am in a dream. If it were not a dream should I be clothed in these rags? . . . "Then he bursts into a loud laugh. 'Ha, ha, ha! It is a dream—a dream!' But the chief justice silences the prisoner and explains why the accused is haunted by the sound of the bells. 'Because there rankles in his heart the memory of what he would conceal from us.' But now the prisoner denies he hears the bells. 'No, I hear nothing' . . . but at these words the bells are heard from far far away."

"And all these things once belonged to the great Henry Irving," I said. "The dagger that he wore at his belt in *Hamlet* and . . . And all these he gave to you. But I am curious to know what it was that he refused to give you."

The kettle was boiling and the old man poured the tea. He continued in a deep bass voice as though he did not hear a word of what I had just said. "The bells seemed so far away and yet how real they were. The prisoner demands an advocate, but the court only grants him a Mesmerist. Soon this black-haired fellow, master of the art of sleep, arrives. Mathias sees him and defies him. 'I will not be made the subject of this conjurer's experiments. . . . I have no fear, he cries. But to himself he whispers, 'Courage, Mathias, if you sleep you are lost.' But the Mesmerist throws his spell over the prisoner and Mathias' eyes become fixed and frozen and his voice speaks from a distant land. 'No—no—I will not sleep—I—will. I will—not—no—' but he breathes deeply. He is asleep. The chief justice orders the Mesmerist, 'Ask him what he did on the night of the 24th of December, fifteen years ago?' In a low voice the sleeping man describes, as though it were a vision before him, how on that very night he murdered the Polish Jew. He tells all. How the Jew came to the inn, how he learnt of the money in his belt, how he crossed the fields to overtake the departing sleigh; and then how he spoke to himself: 'Kill a man!—kill a man! You will not do that, Mathias—you will not do that. Heaven forbids it. . . . ' Then in another voice. You are a fool! Listen, you will be rich. . . . ' Ah! and so the dark deed is described. And all this time every word he utters has been written down. Then the prisoner is awakened and his confession placed in his hands. 'It is false!' he cries. 'You are a set of rogues!' But the judges condemn him to be hanged by the neck until he is dead. And when these words are spoken. . . . "

The old actor knows his lines. His face is alive with excitement. After twenty-two years with Irving anyone would know his lines. But what is it he wanted from Irving? What is he concealing from me? These were the thoughts that occupied my mind.

"And when these words were spoken the dream scene behind the gauze curtain grows dim. The lights return to the stage and Mathias is asleep. But the sleep is a troubled one. Suddenly his name is called and you hear a loud knocking upon the door. Many voices call his name and finally the door is broken down with a crash and many enter. Mathias staggers out of the alcove, his face is drawn and deathly pale. His eyes are bulging, his gaze is fixed, and in a voice of strangulation he cries, 'The rope! The rope! Cut the rope!' He gasps and he struggles.

His last words are, 'Take the rope from my neck—take the rope from my neck!' And that is the end. An imaginary rope but a real death. . . . There! That is melodrama!"

He poured himself another cup of tea.

"And for how many years did Henry Irving play *"The Bells?"*

"From almost the very start of his career, and for over thirty years until the very end. Not *Hamlet,* not *Othello,* nor *Macbeth: The Bells* was his masterpiece."

"Thirty years is a long time," I said.

"Yes, a long time. Everything is a long time. Even a moment is capable of being a long time."

Twilight was creeping in upon us. The dagger on the wall was barely visible. The old man was silent but there was more that he could have said. A good deal more. But he waited. Perhaps he was waiting for the twilight to hide his face before he continued.

At last he said, "No, I never played in *The Bells.* But I knew every line, every gesture, and every grimace of Mathias' was part of me. Ah, yes. And many other parts grand in manner and noble. . . . But do you know what it is to wait? Ah! That is a lesson I would have no man learn. When I first met Irving I was young. I was playing important parts in a good company. The critics were kind enough to notice my presence and it was said I had a career before me. Irving and I were about the same age, and about the same size. I wore Irving's costumes and his wigs. He made me work hard. I became his understudy. Every line he knew, I knew also. Every movement of his I had learnt . . . and I stood in the wings and waited. Sooner or later I was certain that I would have my chance and then. . . . Then I would show the world a piece of acting that would rival the greatest. Sooner or later, if not in *Richard III,* then in *Hamlet* or in *The Lyons Mail* or *The Bells,* I knew them all and I was ready. First a month went by and then a season. I wanted to marry but I put it off until . . . Do you know what it is to be ready, to step forward and know for certain that the moment you did so you would be famous? Today your name is of no account and tomorrow it blazes in glory; and not a glory that is undeserved. A year went by and I waited patiently in the wings, dressed in the part, ready for the moment. . . . What is the murder of a Polish Jew? And what his gold! There are souls more worthy. And can you believe that a man

can be murdered and still may live on? Five years went by and then ten. When I think back upon those days it all seems a dream. And is it not possible for a dream to be true?" His voice grew louder. "Yes. It is a dream. If it were not a dream should I be clothed in these rags? Ha, ha, ha! It is a dream—a dream! Is it a crime to dream! Courage, if you sleep you are lost. Kill a man! You will not do that. Heaven forbids it! What am I saying!" He stopped abruptly. . . . His voice grew softer. "Of course, I was certain that I would have my chance. In time. . . . Ah, some day. They would not let me die in the wings without once showing my face to the public. I was always ready. I could not fall asleep, I dared not grow old. I kept up the parts and knew my lines. . . . And many times after all had gone, when the stage was empty and the theatre was dark, when only the old lame watchman was present, then I would come forward and go through the great moments of the play all alone. I would cry out my lines to the empty seats and the whole hollow place would tremble with the terror that was pent up within me . . . You cannot kill a man! Heaven forbids it. . . . Surely sometime, you would think. . . . But no. My chance never came. Twenty-two years I waited in the wings, and Irving was never sick! Not one day in all this time. Not one little hour. For twenty-two years, dressed in his costumes and wig in hand, I waited. I was his shadow and when he died that shadow crept silently into his grave. Then I was an old man. Then it was over. Wait. Wait, and a life is spent. Wait and someday. . . . Ah, that someday is part of a dream that never came."

He lighted the lamp, and once more one could see the faded playbills on the wall and the long black sword . . . and Hamlet's silver dagger hanging from its metal belt. Ah, you silver-handled little dirk, warmed by the palm of the melancholy black prince of Denmark; that self-centered, ambitious, scheming egotist. Your brooding plots have killed your uncle, your mother, killed your friend and brought madness to your sweetheart, and now, after all these hundreds of years your keen little blade cries for more. Dark prince of ambition, with liquid envy coursing your veins, how many more must you slay! . . . My eyes turned away.

The old gray-headed actor was before me. Now the lamp burned bright and you could see his face. Everything was in that face. The dream, the twenty-two years and everything.

IMPULSE

by

Conrad Aiken

MICHAEL LOWES hummed as he shaved, amused by the face he saw —the pallid, asymmetrical face, with the right eye so much higher than the left, and its eyebrow so peculiarly arched, like a "v" turned upside down. Perhaps this day wouldn't be as bad as the last. In fact, he knew it wouldn't be, and that was why he hummed. This was the bi-weekly day of escape, when he would stay out for the evening, and play bridge with Hurwitz, Bryant, and Smith. Should he tell Dora at the breakfast table? No, better not. Particularly in view of last night's row about unpaid bills. And there would be more of them, probably, beside his plate. The rent. The coal. The doctor who had attended to the children. Jeez, what a life. Maybe it was a time to do a new jump. And Dora was beginning to get restless again—.

But he hummed, thinking of the bridge-game. Not that he liked Hurwitz or Bryant or Smith — cheap fellows, really — mere pick-up acquaintances. But what could you do about making friends, when you were always hopping about from one place to another, looking for a living, and fate always against you! They were all right enough. Good enough for a little escape, a little party,—and Hurwitz always provided good alcohol. Dinner at the Greek's, and then to Smith's room—yes. He would wait till late in the afternoon, and then telephone to Dora as if it had all come up suddenly. Hello Dora—is that you, old girl? Yes, this is Michael—Smith has asked me to drop in for a hand of bridge—you know—so I'll just have a little snack in town. Home by the last car as usual. Yes. . . . Gooo-by! . . .

And it all went off perfectly, too. Dora was quiet, at breakfast, but not hostile. The pile of bills was there, to be sure, but nothing was said about them. And while Dora was busy getting the kids ready for school, he managed to slip out, pretending that he thought it was later than it

really was. Pretty neat, that! He hummed again, as he waited for the train. Telooralooraloo. Let the bills wait, damn them! A man couldn't do everything at once, could he, when bad luck hounded him everywhere? And if he could just get a little night off, now and then, a rest and change, a little diversion, what was the harm in that?

At half past four he rang up Dora and broke the news to her. He wouldn't be home till late.

"Are you sure you'll be home at all?" she said, coolly.

That was Dora's idea of a joke. But if he could have foreseen—!

He met the others at the Greek restaurant, began with a couple of *araks,* which warmed him, then went on to red wine, bad olives, *pilaf,* and other obscure foods; and considerably later they all walked along Boylston Street to Smith's room. It was a cold night, the temperature below twenty, with a fine dry snow sifting the streets. But Smith's room was comfortably warm, he trotted out some gin and the Porto Rican cigars, showed them a new snapshot of Squiggles (his Revere Beach sweetheart), and then they settled down to a nice long cosy game of bridge.

It was during an intermission, when they all got up to stretch their legs and renew their drinks, that the talk started—Michael never could remember which one of them it was who had put in the first oar—about impulse. It might have been Hurwitz, who was in many ways the only intellectual one of the three, though hardly what you might call a highbrow. He had his queer curiosities, however, and the idea was just such as might occur to him. At any rate, it was he who developed the idea, and with gusto.

"Sure," he said, "anybody might do it. Have you got impulses? Of course you got impulses. How many times you think—suppose I do that? And you don't do it, because you know damn well if you do it you'll get arrested. You meet a man you despise—you want to spit in his eye. You see a girl you'd like to kiss—you want to kiss her. Or maybe just to squeeze her arm when she stands beside you in the streetcar. You know what I mean."

"DO I know what you *mean!*" sighed Smith. "I'll tell the world. I'll tell the cock-eyed world! . . . "

"You would," said Bryant. "And so would I."

"It would be easy," said Hurwitz, "to give in to it. You know what

I mean? So simple. Temptation is too close. That girl you see is too damn good-looking—she stands too near you—you just put out your hand it touches her arm,—maybe her leg,—why worry? And you think, maybe if she don't like it I can make believe I didn't mean it. . . . "

"Like these fellows that slash fur coats with razor-blades," said Michael. "Just impulse, in the beginning, and only later a habit."

"Sure. . . . And like these fellows that cut off braids of hair with scissors. They just feel like it and do it. . . . Or stealing."

"Stealing?" said Bryant.

"Sure. Why, I often feel like it. . . . I see a nice little thing right in front of me on a counter—you know, a nice little knife, or necktie, or a box of candy—quick, you put it in your pocket, and then go to the other counter, or the soda fountain for a drink. What would be more human? We all want things. Why not take them? Why not do them? And civilization is only skin deep. . . . "

"That's right. Skin deep," said Bryant.

"But if you were caught, by God!" said Smith, opening his eyes wide.

"*Who's* talking about getting caught? . . . *Who's* talking about doing it? It isn't that we do it, it's only that we *want* to do it. Why, Christ, there's been times when I thought to hell with everything. I'll kiss that woman if it's the last thing I do."

"It might be," said Bryant.

Michael was astonished at this turn of the talk. He had often felt both these impulses. To know that this was a kind of universal human inclination came over him with something like relief.

"Of *course* everybody has those feelings," he said smiling. "I have them myself. . . . But suppose you *did* yield to them?"

"Well, we don't," said Hurwitz.

"I know,—but suppose you did?"

Hurwitz shrugged his fat shoulders, indifferently.

"Oh well," he said, "it would be bad business."

"Jesus, yes," said Smith, shuffling the cards.

"Oy," said Bryant.

The game was resumed, the glasses were re-filled, pipes were lit, watches were looked at. Michael had to think of the last car from Sullivan Square, at eleven-fifty. But also he could not stop thinking of

this strange idea. It was amusing. It was fascinating. Here was everyone wanting to steal—toothbrushes, or books—or to caress some fascinating stranger of a female in a subway train—the impulse everywhere—why not be a Columbus of the moral world and really do it? . . . He remembered stealing a conch-shell from the drawing-room of a neighbor when he was ten—it had been one of the thrills of his life. He had popped it into his sailor-blouse and borne it way with perfect aplomb. When, later, suspicion had been cast upon him, he had smashed the shell in his back yard. And often, when he had been looking at Parker's collection of stamps—the early Americans—

The game interrupted his recollections, and presently it was time for the usual night-cap. Bryant drove them to Park Street. Michael was a trifle tight, but not enough to be unsteady on his feet. He waved a cheery hand at Bryant and Hurwitz and began to trudge through the snow to the subway entrance. The lights on the snow were very beautiful. The Park Street Church was ringing, with its queer, soft quarter-bells, the half hour. Plenty of time. Plenty of time. Time enough for a visit to the drug-store, and a hot chocolate—he could see the warm lights of the windows falling on the snowed sidewalk. He zigzagged across the street and entered.

And at once he was seized with a conviction that his real reason for entering the drug-store was not to get a hot chocolate,—not at all! He was going to steal something. He was going to put the impulse to the test, and see whether (*one*) he could manage it with sufficient skill, and (*two*) whether theft gave him any real satisfaction. The drug-store was crowded with people who had just come from the theatre next door. They pushed three deep round the soda fountain, and the cashier's cage. At the back of the store, in the toilet and prescription department, there were not so many, but nevertheless enough to give him a fair chance. All the clerks were busy. His hands were in the side pockets of his overcoat—they were deep wide pockets and would serve admirably. A quick gesture over a table or counter, the object dropped in—

Oddly enough, he was not in the least excited: perhaps that was because of the gin. On the contrary, he was intensely amused; not to say delighted. He was smiling, as he walked slowly along the right hand side of the store towards the back; edging his way amongst the people, with first one shoulder forward and then the other, while with

a critical and appraising eye he examined the wares piled on the counters and on the stands in the middle of the floor. There were some extremely attractive scent-sprays or atomizers—but the dangling bulbs might be troublesome. There were stacks of boxed letter-paper. A basket full of clothes-brushes. Green hot water bottles. Percolators—too large, and out of the question. A tray of multi-colored toothbrushes, bottles of cologne, fountain-pens—and then he experienced love at first sight. There could be no question that he had found his chosen victim. He gazed, fascinated, at the delicious object—a *de luxe* safety-razor set, of heavy gold, in a snakeskin box which was lined with red plush. . . .

It wouldn't do, however, to stare at it too long—one of the clerks might notice. He observed quickly the exact position of the box,—which was close to the edge of the glass counter, — and prefigured with a quite precise mental picture the gesture with which he would simultaneously close it and remove it. Forefinger at the back—thumb in front —the box drawn forward and then slipped down towards the pocket—as he thought it out, the muscles in his forearm pleasurably contracted. He continued his slow progress round the store, past the prescription counter, past the candy counter; examined with some show of attention the display of cigarette-lighters and blade sharpeners; and then, with a quick turn, went leisurely back to his victim. Everything was propitious. The whole section of counter was clear for the moment—there were neither customers nor clerks. He approached the counter, leaned over it as if to examine some little filigreed "compacts" at the back of the show-case, picking up one of them with his left hand, as he did so. He was thus leaning directly over the box; and it was the simplest thing in the world to clasp it as planned between the thumb and forefinger of his other hand, to shut it softly, and to slide it downward to his pocket. It was over in an instant. He continued then for a moment to turn the compact case this way and that in the light, as if to see it sparkle. It sparkled very nicely. Then he put it back on the little pile of cases, turned, and approached the soda fountain—just as Hurwitz had suggested.

He was in the act of pressing forward in the crowd to ask for his hot cholocate when he felt a firm hand close round his elbow. He turned, and looked at a man in a slouch hat and dirty raincoat, with the collar turned up. The man was smiling in a very offensive way.

"I guess you thought that was pretty slick," he said in a low voice which nevertheless managed to convey the very essence of venom and hostility. "You come along with me, mister!"

Michael returned the smile amiably, but was a little frightened. His heart began to beat.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, still smiling.

"No, of course not!"

The man was walking toward the rear of the store, and was pulling Michael along with him, keeping a paralyzingly tight grip on his elbow. Michael was beginning to be angry, but also to be horrified. He thought of wrenching his arm free, but feared it would make a scene. Better not. He permitted himself to be urged ignominiously along the shop, through a gate in the rear counter, and into a small room at the back, where a clerk was measuring a yellow liquid into a bottle.

"Will you be so kind as to explain to me what this is all about?" he then said, with what frigidity of manner he could muster. But his voice shook a little. The man in the slouch hat paid no attention. He addressed the clerk instead, giving his head a quick backward jerk as he spoke.

"Get the manager in here," he said.

He smiled at Michael, with narrowed eyes, and Michael, hating him, but panic-stricken, smiled foolishly back at him.

"Now, look here—" he said.

But the manager had appeared, and the clerk; and events then happened with revolting and nauseating speed. Michael's hand was yanked violently from his pocket, the fatal snakeskin box was pulled out by the detective, and identified by the manager and the clerk. They both looked at Michael with a queer expression, in which astonishment, shame, and contempt were mixed with vague curiosity.

"Sure that's ours," said the manager, looking slowly at Michael.

"I saw him pinch it," said the detective. "What about it?" He again smiled offensively at Michael. "Anything to say?"

"It was all a joke," said Michael, his face feeling very hot and flushed. "I made a kind of bet with some friends. . . . I can prove it. I can call them up for you."

The three men looked at him in silence, all three of them just faintly smiling, as if incredulously.

"Sure you can," said the detective, urbanely. "You can prove it in court. . . . Now come along with me, mister."

Michael was astounded at this appalling turn of events, but his brain still worked. Perhaps if he were to put it to this fellow as man to man, when they got outside? As he was thinking this, he was firmly conducted through a back door into a dark alley at the rear of the store. It had stopped snowing. A cold wind was blowing. But the world, which had looked so beautiful fifteen minutes before, had now lost its charm. They walked together down the alley in six inches of powdery snow, the detective holding Michael's arm with affectionate firmness.

"No use calling the wagon," he said. "We'll walk. It ain't far."

They walked along Tremont Street. And Michael couldn't help, even then, thinking what an extraordinary thing this was! Here were all these good people passing them, and little knowing that he, Michael Lowes, was a thief, a thief by accident, on his way to jail. It seemed so absurd as hardly to be worth speaking of! And suppose they shouldn't believe him? This notion made him shiver. But it wasn't possible—no, it wasn't possible. As soon as he had told his story, and called up Hurwitz and Bryant and Smith, it would all be laughed off. Yes, laughed off.

He began telling the detective about it: how they had discussed such impulses over a game of bridge. Just a friendly game, and they had joked about it and then, just to see what would happen, he had done it. What was it that made his voice sound so insincere, so hollow? The detective neither slackened his pace nor turned his head. His business-like grimness was alarming. Michael felt that he was paying no attention at all; and moreover, it occurred to him that this kind of low-brow official might not even understand such a thing. . . . He decided to try the sentimental.

"And good Lord, man, there's my wife waiting for me—!"

"Oh sure, and the kids too."

"Yes, and the kids!"

The detective gave a quick leer over the collar of his dirty raincoat.

"And no Santy Claus *this* year," he said.

Michael saw that it was hopeless. He was wasting his time.

"I can see it's no use talking to you," he said stiffly. "You're so

used to dealing with criminals that you think all mankind is criminal, *ex post facto*."

"Sure."

Arrived at the station, and presented without decorum to the lieutenant at the desk, Michael tried again. Something in the faces of the lieutenant and the sergeant, as he told his story, made it at once apparent that there was going to be trouble. They obviously didn't believe him—not for a moment. But after consultation, they agreed to call up Bryant and Hurwitz and Smith, and to make inquiries. The sergeant went off to do this, while Michael sat on a wooden bench. Fifteen minutes passed, during which the clock ticked and the lieutenant wrote slowly in a book, using a blotter very frequently. A clerk had been dispatched, also, to look up Michael's record, if any. This gentleman came back first, and reported that there was nothing. The lieutenant scarcely looked up from his book, and went on writing. The first serious blow then fell. The sergeant, reporting, said that he hadn't been able to get Smith (of course—Michael thought—he's off somewhere with Squiggles) but had got Hurwitz and Bryant. Both of them denied that there had been any bet. They both seemed nervous, as far as he could make out over the phone. They said they didn't know Lowes well, were acquaintances of his, and made it clear that they didn't want to be mixed up in anything. Hurwitz had added that he knew Lowes was hard up.

At this, Michael jumped to his feet, feeling as if the blood would burst out of his face.

"The damned liars!" he shouted. "The bloody liars! By God—!"

"Take him away," said the lieutenant, lifting his eyebrows, and making a motion with his pen.

Michael lay awake all night in his cell, after talking for five minutes with Dora on the telephone. Something in Dora's cool voice had frightened him more than anything else.

And when Dora came to talk to him the next morning at nine o'clock, his alarm proved to be well-founded. Dora was cold, detached, deliberate. She was not at all what he had hoped she might be—sympathetic and helpful. She didn't volunteer to get a lawyer, or in fact to do anything—and when she listened quietly to his story, it seemed to

him that she had the appearance of a person listening to a very improbable lie. Again, as he narrated the perfectly simple episode—the discussion of "impulse" at the bridge-game, the drinks, and the absurd tipsy desire to try a harmless little experiment—again, as when he talked to the store-detective, he heard his own voice becoming hollow and insincere. It was exactly as if he knew himself to be guilty. His throat grew dry, he began to falter, to lose his thread, to use the wrong words. When he stopped speaking, finally, Dora was silent.

"Well, say something!" he said angrily, after a moment. "Don't just stare at me! I'm not a criminal!"

"I'll get a lawyer for you," she answered, "but that's all I can do."

"Look here, Dora—you don't mean you—"

He looked at her incredulously. It wasn't possible that she really thought him a thief? And suddenly, as he looked at her, he realized how long it was since he had really known this woman. They had drifted apart. She was embittered, that was it—embittered by his non-success. All this time she had slowly been laying up a reserve of resentment. She had resented his inability to make money for the children, the little dishonesties they had had to commit in the matter of unpaid bills, the humiliations of duns, the too-frequent removals from town to town—she had more than once said to him, it was true, that because of all this she had never had any friends—and she had resented, he knew, his gay little parties with Hurwitz and Bryant and Smith, implying a little that they were an extravagance which was to say the least inconsiderate. Perhaps they *had* been. But was a man to have no indulgences . . .?

"Perhaps we had better not go into that," she said.

"Good Lord,—you don't believe me!"

"I'll get the lawyer—though I don't know where the fees are to come from. Our bank account is down to seventy-seven dollars. The rent is due a week from today. You've got some salary coming, of course, but I don't want to touch my own savings, naturally, because the children and I may need them."

To be sure. Perfectly just. Women and children first. Michael thought these things bitterly, but refrained from saying them. He gazed at this queer cold little female with intense curiosity. It was simply extraordinary—simply astonishing. Here she was, seven years his wife, he thought he knew her inside and out, every quirk of her handwriting,

inflection of voice; her passion for strawberries, her ridiculous way of singing; the brown moles on her shoulder, the extreme smallness of her feet and toes, her dislike of silk underwear. Her special voice at the telephone, too—that rather chilly abruptness, which had always surprised him, as if she might be a much harder woman than he thought her to be. And the queer sinuous cat-like rhythm with which she always combed her hair before the mirror at night, before going to bed—with her head tossing to one side, and one knee advanced to touch the chest of drawers. He knew all these things, which nobody else knew, and nevertheless, now, they amounted to nothing. The woman herself stood before him as opaque as a wall.

"Of course," he said, "you'd better keep your own savings." His voice was dull. "And you'll of course look up Hurwitz and the others? They'll appear, I'm sure, and it will be the most important evidence. In fact, *the* evidence."

"I'll ring them up, Michael," was all she said, and with that she turned quickly on her heel and went away. . . .

Michael felt doom closing in upon him: his wits went round in circles: he was in a constant sweat. It wasn't possible that he was going to be betrayed? It wasn't possible! He assured himself of this. He walked back and forth, rubbing his hands together, he kept pulling out his watch to see what time it was. Five minutes gone. Another five minutes gone. Damnation, if this lasted too long, this confounded business, he'd lose his job. If it got into the papers, he might lose it anyway. And suppose it was true that Hurwitz and Bryant had said what they said—maybe they were afraid of losing their jobs too. Maybe that was it! Good God. . . .

This suspicion was confirmed, when hours, later, the little Jew lawyer came to see him. He reported that Hurwitz, Bryant and Smith had all three refused flatly to be mixed up in the business. They were all afraid of the effects of the publicity. If subpoenaed, they said, they would state that they had known Lowes only a short time, had thought him a little eccentric, and knew him to be hard up. Obviously—and the little lawyer picked his teeth with the point of his pencil—they could not be summoned. It would be fatal.

The Judge, not unnaturally perhaps, decided that there was a per-

fectly clear case. There couldn't be the shadow of a doubt that this man had deliberately stolen an article from the counter of So-and-so's drug-store. The prisoner had stubbornly maintained that it was the result of a kind of bet with some friends, but these friends had refused to give testimony in his behalf. Even his wife's testimony—that he had never done such a thing before—had seemed rather half-hearted; and she had admitted, moreover, that Lowes was unsteady, and that they were always living in a state of something like poverty. Prisoner, further, had once or twice jumped his rent and had left behind him in Somerville unpaid debts of considerable size. He was a college man, a man of exceptional education and origin, and ought to have known better. His general character might be good enough, but as against all this, here was a perfectly clear case of theft, and a perfectly clear motive. The prisoner was sentenced to three months in the house of correction.

By this time, Michael was in a state of complete stupor. He sat in the box and stared blankly at Dora who sat very quietly in the second row, as if she were a stranger. She was looking back at him, with her white face turned a little to one side, as if she too had never seen him before, and were wondering what sort of people criminals might be. Human? Sub-human? She lowered her eyes, after a moment, and, before she had looked up again, Michael had been touched on the arm and led stumbling out of the courtroom. He thought she would of course come to say good-bye to him, but even in this he was mistaken: she left without a word.

And when he did finally hear from her, after a week, it was in a very brief note.

"Michael," it said, "I'm sorry but I can't bring up the children with a criminal for a father, so I'm taking proceedings for a divorce. This is the last straw. It was bad enough to have you always out of work and to have to slave night and day to keep bread in the children's mouths. But this is too much, to have disgrace into the bargain. As it is, we'll have to move right away, for the school-children have sent Dolly and Mary home crying three times already. I'm sorry, and you know how fond I was of you at the beginning, but you've had your chance. You won't hear from me again. You've always been a good sport, and generous, and I hope you'll make this occasion no exception, and refrain from contesting the divorce. Good-bye—Dora."

Michael held the letter in his hands, unseeing, and tears came into his eyes. He dropped his face against the sheet of note-paper, and rubbed his forehead to and fro across it . . . Little Dolly! . . . Little Mary! . . . Of course. This was what life was. It was just as meaningless and ridiculous as this; a monstrous joke; a huge injustice. You couldn't trust anybody, not even your wife, not even your best friends. You went on a little lark, and they sent you to prison for it, and your friends lied about you, and your wife left you. . . .

Contest it? Should he contest the divorce? What was the use? There was the plain fact, that he had been convicted for stealing. No one had believed his story of doing it in fun, after a few drinks: the divorce court would be no exception. He dropped the letter to the floor and turned his heel on it, slowly and bitterly. Good riddance—good riddance! Let them all go to hell. He would show them. He would go west, when he came out,—get rich, clear his name somehow. . . . But how?

He sat down on the edge of his bed and thought of Chicago. He thought of his childhood there, the Lake Shore Drive, Winnetka, the trip to Niagara Falls with his mother. He could hear the Falls now. He remembered the Fourth of July on the boat; the crowded examination room at college; the time he had broken his leg in baseball, when he was fourteen, and the stamp collection which he had lost at school. He remembered his mother always saying, "Michael, you *must* learn to be orderly;" and the little boy who had died of scarlet fever next door; and the pink conch-shell smashed in the back yard. His whole life seemed to be composed of such trivial and infinitely charming little episodes as these; and as he thought of them, affectionately and with wonder, he assured himself once more that he had really been a good man. And now, had it all come to an end? It had all come foolishly to an end.

SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY

by

Martha Foley

EMILY had the mumps. She had discovered funny lumps in her throat and made the mistake of showing them to her father. He immediately said "mumps" and sent her to bed. That was the worst of having a doctor for a father. Or should it be a father for a doctor? They made you sick whether you wanted to be or not. Sometimes it was nice. She would never have got these lovely shiny spectacles to wear if her father weren't Dr. Graham. She told him one day about her lesson in school. You know Miss Lunt says you can't see the air and the book says you can't but *I* can see the air. Well, well. That's a lot for a little girl to see. I've never seen the air. What does it look like? A lot of little black specks going round and round. Do you see the air all the time? All the time, except when I am asleep. Hm-m-m, we shall have to look into this. The next day Emily was taken to Dr. Prentiss whose sign said OCULIST and he tried all kinds of spectacles on her nose while he made her read something she couldn't read and the day after she was given a pair all for herself. Some of the children called her Four-Eyes but that was really because they were jealous and wanted to have glasses, too. Oh, Emily, let me wear them! Let me wear them, they all said the first day she went to school with the glasses. Emily had picked out her best friends. I'll let Ruth wear them until recess, and after recess Alice can wear them. But don't forget to give them back to me at noon, Alice. The last time I lent you my locket you went home with it and the family wouldn't believe I hadn't lost my very best locket which belonged to my grandmother and has the turquoises in it. This afternoon I'll let Helen take my eyeglasses until recess and then Mary can have them until school is over. Tomorrow! Tomorrow! I want them tomorrow! But Emily had decided it would mix her up too much to promise them for the next day so she had said, we'll wait until tomor-

row and those girls who are the very nicest to me today can have my eyeglasses tomorrow. She would have lent them to Joan and Hazel and Violet and Dorothy too if Miss Crowell hadn't come into her classroom and said to Miss Lunt have you a little girl here who wears glasses and Miss Lunt said no. But Emily raised her hand and said I do. Miss Lunt had looked surprised and said but are you sure Emily? I've never seen you wearing glasses. Oh, yes, Miss Lunt. Don't you remember I was excused from school last week so I could have my eyes examined? But you've never worn any glasses. That's because I've lent them. Emily! Don't you know you can't lend eyeglasses! That only the person they are made for can wear them? Besides if you're supposed to wear glasses they're not doing you any good on some other little girl's nose. Miss Crowell hadn't been so strict. She had smiled and said I guess Emily was trying to be generous. I have brought her glasses back for her. She took her hand from behind her back and there were the eyeglasses. Emily took them and while the whole class watched Emily wiped each glass carefully with a little pink cloth out of her eyeglass case and then she put the glasses on her nose and looked at Miss Lunt out of them. Miss Lunt smiled and Miss Crowell laughed. Emily was afraid at first she might have been kept after school, Miss Lunt had been so severe, but when she saw her smile she knew it was all right.

And now just when everybody in the school had got used to Emily's glasses and she couldn't be proud of them anymore she had got the mumps. All the girls at recess had felt her neck and Emily had kept going up to the school window where it was dark like a mirror to see how much bigger her neck was getting all the time. Her throat hadn't been sore at all at first. Just bigger and bigger. It was funny trying to turn her neck like this and like that. One minute it would turn so far and the next it wouldn't turn nearly so far. She must be getting a fat neck like Mrs. Pierce. Probably that was where women first began putting on weight. She had kept her neck quiet in school so Miss Lunt wouldn't notice and then she had made the mistake of telling her father when she got home.

She was to stay out of school three weeks. The first ten days she was to stay in bed. After that she could sit up and then a few days later she could go out. That is she could go out if she promised not to go near her brothers or any other children. But what was the fun of having

the mumps if you couldn't tell people you had them while you were having them? After the mumps were all over nobody would get excited about them. Then there was nasty little Josephine Parkerson. She was bound to say I don't believe you ever had the mumps. You're just making believe again. Of course Emily did make believe a lot but it was interesting and a lot of girls liked to have her make believe. Oh, Emily, let's make believe something! They would all sit down together while Emily made believe they were little girls a giant with big eyes and hairy arms and hands had captured and he was about to eat them all up and then she would jump up and say oh here! he's coming, run! run! And they would all run screaming. She couldn't make believe the giant eating little girls anymore though because Ruth's mother had been scared when she heard them all running screaming from the giant. So Emily had to play more quiet make-believe like Queen Titania's court when she sat on a throne and the other little girls all sat around with their hair unbraided and made believe they were good fairies who could do all kinds of things with a touch of the long wands they carried which were sticks from bushes with just a little tuft of leaves left on the ends. They pretended they were turning everything they touched to candy until one of them accidentally touched Dorothy's baby brother. And Dorothy who really was too little to be playing make-believe anyway had cried and cried and said she didn't want her baby brother to be eaten up for candy and everybody had got terribly excited and tried to make Dorothy stop crying and told her not to be such a baby that it was all only make-believe and that nobody was going to eat her brother. Then Emily had remembered something about a man-witch named Merlin and she said, Wait! Wait! We'll get Merlin! Everybody asked who Merlin was and she told them and Dorothy stopped crying about her brother being candy. Emily went away and in a little time she came back and she was wearing a long black cloth over her head so you could hardly see her face and in a low deep voice she said I am Merlin who wants me here and Dorothy started to cry again so Emily said as quickly as she could this baby won't be candy anymore I'll make him a real baby again and she said Hoochy-Poochy pronto changeo! He was still asleep so to prove he was changed she pinched him and he cried and the baby was real again. And Dorothy instead of saying thank you had got mad and wheeled her brother off in his baby carriage and said I'm

never going to bring my brother here again to be made into candy and get pinched so he cries! Something like that was always happening when Emily played make-believe and she couldn't make the other children understand how something you made believe was so really wasn't so. Anyhow she was getting to be eleven years old and that was pretty big for make-believe except to one's self. In fact making believe to one's self was much more fun. It was like having a secret.

She could do a lot of make-believing while she was staying in bed for ten days having the mumps. Sometimes she would pretend the bed was a boat. It was out in the middle of the ocean and she was floating along in it. She would pass beautiful islands with palm trees and birds in them singing. There would be caves on the islands and beautiful women with long golden hair singing in the cave openings. She would float and float and that was a good make-believe for going to sleep. Then she would make believe that her bed was in a hospital and that she had been a soldier wounded doing his duty on the battlefront. Nurses were hovering around her and people were telling her how brave she was. She could hear cannons bombarding in the distance and the enemy shouting. People would run in and out of the hospital room saying, Oh, what a brave man you are! You have saved your country! Hear the enemy shouting. You fought so bravely you made them run. They don't like it. Hear the way they are shouting. The cannon would roar and the enemy shout. A band leading her conquering army to victory would be playing Hail Columbia the Gem of the Ocean. She sat up in bed and said I have given all for my country. And fell back dead.

Let's see, what else could she be? She could hitch the spread up to the top of the bed and pretend she was in a tent. That she was a pioneer camping out on the cold, cold ground. Listen to the winds howl! And the snow was coming down fast, covering up the earth and the bushes and the trees and the tent. It was a terrible blizzard, the worst in many years. Oh, it was good to lie here in bed—in the tent snug and warm.

Emily put the sheet back. She could also, by holding the sides of the spread tight under her arms, pretend she was a prisoner of the Indians lying on the ground. But she was tired of making believe. And she had read all the big green Dickens volumes lying on the chair beside her bed. The Commercial Traveler and Bleak House and even The Mystery of Edwin Drood. She felt a little cross about Edwin Drood.

After all Dickens had no right to begin a novel and then leave it right in midair even if it wasn't his fault that he did die. But somehow those tall thin volumes that always seemed so reliable to her had failed her. She would never be able to look into them again sure they would satisfy her interest. Edwin Drood bothered her. She tried to figure it out but none of her endings for the book, Drood murdered, Drood posing as the other man, Drood back from the colonies with lots of money, seemed to be right. So she gave it up and went back to The Commercial Traveler, the least liked of the Dickens stories which she read only after she had read everything else.

She would polish her glasses, Emily decided. She carefully took the little pink cloth the optician had given her out of her black leather case and wiped her glasses. The world always seemed brighter when she put them on.

Her glasses sparkling bright she lay back in bed, facing the window which opened on a neighbor's garden. She looked at the green of a budding tree and other trees beyond.

Suddenly Emily looked up—and she knew what beauty was. It was the corner of the house next door against the sky. The sky was blue. The house corner a simple angle painted yellow. But, oh, it was beautiful! The house corner, the sky. A little yellow and a lot of blue. And it was the first really beautiful thing she had ever seen. Or the first thing she knew for herself was beautiful.

Emily lay back in bed, holding her vision. So that was beauty! What she felt. It was what poets and artists had, it was what people were always talking about when they said the word beautiful and she had thought it was something pretty like her turquoise locket or Alice's long curls. But beauty such as this was different from all the turquoise lockets in the world. This beauty made you tremble and made you happy and sad and excited. Beauty! She had beauty!

All the rest of the time Emily had the mumps she lay quietly in bed. Her books she didn't read except one day to turn over the leaves looking for all references to beauty. She stopped playing the games of make-believe and she paid no attention to the cards and other games her family gave her. Instead she looked constantly out of the window, not always at the corner of the house next door. She tried again and again to come upon it suddenly as she had that first day when the sight

had given her such an unknown feeling. But it never gave her quite the same start although she learned it could act as a rousing thing from which to go on to other loveliness.

Emily would look at the corner of the house and then at the leaves on the tree. She saw for the first time how delicate they were and how lightly the sun glistened on them. She watched first the leaves and then the branches take a pattern on the blue of the sky. She watched the clouds in the sky coming up slowly and whitely. At night she looked at the stars and listened to the stirring of the leaves in the winds of the darkness. Beauty! I have beauty!

"Are you sure you are feeling better?" Her family bothered her with questions. Oh, thought Emily, if they would only go away and leave me alone. I want to look at the corner of the house. "Why don't you play with the nice games we brought you?" Or "Do you miss all your little playmates? Only a few days, now, dear, and you can get up and go out and play."

She heard her mother and her aunt discussing her in the next room. "I'm a little worried about Emily. She lies in bed so quietly and doesn't seem to take an interest in anything anymore. Andrew says it's just an ordinary case of mumps such as all children have but it doesn't seem natural for her to be so quiet. She's always been so full of spirits."

And her aunt's voice. "Probably the mumps make her feel tired and lethargic. I wouldn't worry about it. And doesn't she look a funny little owl lying there so solemnly with her big spectacles and swollen throat?"

Emily began to hate the thought of getting up until one day it occurred to her that perhaps other things might make her feel beautiful the way the corner of the house did. Perhaps that old bridge over the river where her father liked to walk so often. He always said when she asked him why do you come this way all the time, because it is beautiful along here. She would go and see how beautiful it was as soon as she was well. She wanted to go back into the art museum too and see if the statues and pictures everyone said were so beautiful made her feel the way the corner of the house did. The last time she had been taken to the art museum she tried to stay in the mummy room and when her father took her into the classical statue room she had kept trying to look at the undressed men without having anyone notice what part she was looking at. Funny that men should be made that way, all outside.

It ought to seem heavy to them or perhaps it was just the same as having an arm or a leg.

The day she got up for the first time she wanted to run everywhere looking for beauty. She was made to stay in the garden or on the porch lying in the hammock. So all she could do in the way of finding beauty was to study the flowers. Nasturtiums and hollyhocks, somehow, never seemed very nice to her anyway. Too ordinary. Yet the corner of that house was ordinary and it made her feel beauty. Emily concentrated on a tall, swaying hollyhock hooked with great pink flowers. No, hollyhocks suggested barnyards where most of them were planted and what could be less beautiful than a barnyard? Now the syringa wasn't so bad. The more you looked the lovelier it became, the flowers were small white stars and to close your eyes and breathe their fragrance was sweet.

For a long time after she got better Emily didn't play much with the other children. Near the school was an office building with wide steps where the girls liked to play jackstones. The steps looked down the street toward the west. One late afternoon Emily sat on the steps watching the sky turn rose. She was thinking how beautiful it was and how much more beautiful it would be if only she could hear music as she watched the coloring sky.

"Oh, come on, Emily, why don't you play? If you're no good at jackstones we can play jump rope but if you don't hold the rope first why we can't play jump rope because that wouldn't be fair."

"I can't. I'm watching the sunset."

"What are you doing that for?"

"It's beautiful."

The other children turned and look surprised at the sunset.

"It's just the same as it always is."

"Yes, but it's always beautiful. And a thing of beauty is a joy forever. Didn't you ever read poetry? A thing of beauty . . ."

"Beauty! Oh, you're crazy!"

Ruth turned away and picked up the jump rope.

"She's crazy! Emily's crazy! Emily's crazy!" They skipped in time to the refrain. "Emily's crazy!"

But Emily sat on the steps, her face held tight in her hands, her eyes behind her glasses fixed on the sky. She had a secret. Beauty was her secret. She would never talk about it to Alice or Ruth again.

MASSES OF MEN

by

Erskine Caldwell

HUGH MILLER worked for the street railway company. Hugh had a silver button, a gold button, a bronze watch-fob made like a trolley-car, and a small tin disk with the numeral 7 almost worn off. He had worked for the company twenty-six years repairing tracks, and the company had once told him that some day he would be retired with a comfortable pension.

After all those years, Hugh was still trying to get along in the world. He still hoped to be made superintendent of construction. For some reason, though, he had never got far. He was still repairing tracks. Even though there were other men who were stepped ahead when the time came to fill up the ranks, Hugh kept his job as a laborer, repairing the tracks year after year, and hoped he would be made superintendent before he got too old to work any longer.

"I'll get it yet," he told himself. "I'll get it as sure as shooting. They've got to promote me some day, and I've been working long enough now to get it. I'll get it as sure as shooting."

Hugh had put off marrying Cora until he was promoted. Cora told him that she did not mind waiting a little longer, because she was working then in a store in town and earning as much as Hugh himself was. But after the twelfth year, Hugh decided that if he ever was going to get married, he ought to do it without further delay. He was growing old, and, although Cora was still as youthful in appearance as she was when they became engaged, she was beginning to complain of the long hours she was compelled to stand on her feet behind the counter in the notion store.

"We'll get married right now," Hugh told her one Saturday night while they were riding home on his company pass. "There's no sense in waiting any longer. If you are ready, we'll be married next week.

I've been thinking about it a long time, and there's no sense in waiting till I get promoted."

"I'd love to, Hugh," she said, clutching his arm in the crowded car. "I think it's silly to put it off any longer. I've been hoping for it to happen for I don't know how long. We don't have to wait until you get promoted."

They got off the car at the boulevard stop and walked slowly home. They lived next door to each other, in boarding houses, and there was no hurry since it was Saturday night.

That was the beginning. They walked slowly down the dark street talking about next week, and Hugh kept saying to himself under his breath that he would surely be promoted the next time the company filled up the ranks. He was certain of it. He told Cora he was. She believed him.

After they were married, Hugh rented a five-room house not far from the car-barn. It was just a step down the alley from the tree-lined street where the trollies passed all day long. It was a good house, for the money, and it was comfortable. Having their door-step in an alley did not really matter so much after all. They did not mind that. The house was almost on the corner, and the upstairs windows looked out over the tree-lined street. They could step out the front door, walk a few steps, and be in the street. It was not a bad place to live, and Cora liked it.

First there was a girl; they named her Pearl. Later there was a boy, John; after another year there was another girl, and they named her Ruby.

Hugh still looked forward to the time when he would be made superintendent of construction for the street railway company, but after Ruby was born, he did not think about it any more. Cora had stopped working in the notion store; she stayed at home and attended to the house and cared for the children. She was beginning to wonder what she could do to her skin to keep it from turning so dark; in the meantime, she hid her face when people for some reason or other came to the door. She knew there was nothing wrong with her skin; it was merely becoming darker and darker every day. But she wished she knew what to do about it. Her hair already had a streak of gray in it.

She would have mentioned it to Hugh, but Hugh never talked any

more. When he came home from work, he ate his supper and went to bed. She did not have a chance to tell Hugh anything like that. He was too tired to listen to her.

When Pearl, the oldest child, was nine, Hugh was knocked down by an automobile one day while he was jacking up a rail to replace a rotted cross-tie, and run over and killed. The company sent his body home that evening, when the rest of the workers got off at five o'clock, and Cora did not know what to do. After she had put the children to bed, she went out and walked down the street until she saw a policeman. She told him what had happened to Hugh, and he said he would have the body taken away the next morning. She went back home and looked at Hugh, but she could not notice any difference in him; at home, he was always asleep.

Cora knew there would be a little money coming in from the company. She was certain there would be something, but she was afraid it would not be enough to pay for Hugh's funeral and burial, and leave enough for them to live on until she could find work of some kind.

The policeman had the body taken away the next morning, and it was buried somewhere. Cora did not know where, but she did know it was the only thing she could do about it. The children had to have food, and they had to have a little heat in the house.

She waited a month for the money to come from the street railway company, and still it did not come. After that she went to the office and asked for it. There was no one there who seemed to know anything about the matter. Nobody in the big brick building had ever heard of Hugh Miller, and when they looked up the name, no one was certain which Hugh Miller she had inquired about. Cora stayed there all day, but when the people in the building went home at dark, she did not know what else to do except to go home, too.

After that she did not bother the people at the street railway company any more. She did not have time to go there, for one thing; and she had a lot to do at home. The three children had to be taken care of, and she had to go out every day and find enough food to keep them from being hungry. Sometimes it took her all day long to get enough just for one small meal; other times she could find nothing at all for them to eat, but she kept on walking because the children had to be fed.

Pearl was going on ten. She was the oldest, and Ruby was still

just a baby. But Pearl was growing up. She had long yellow hair and a blue gingham dress, and she tried to help her mother all she could. She cared for the other children while Cora was out trying to get some food, and at night she helped her mother put them to bed. After they were asleep, Cora would tell her about her father, Hugh.

"Your father worked for the street railway company," she told Pearl. "The company would help us out, but they are so busy up there they can't seem to find time to do anything about it. They would help us if they could get all the Hugh Millers who have worked for them straight in their minds. Your father was just one of them."

"I can work," Pearl told her mother. "I'm old enough now. I'll see if I can find something to do. You take me with you, Mama, and I'll ask about it. John and Ruby can take care of each other if we lock them in a room before we go out."

"You're not very big for your age," Cora said. "People wouldn't believe you when you told them you are going on ten."

"But I can work. I'll show them how much I can do."

"Hugh worked for the street railway company, Pearl. He was your father. Some day the company will help us. They're busy right now. I don't like to bother them so much."

Pearl went to bed telling her mother that she was old enough to work. Cora did not say anything else to her, but she could not think of any kind of work that Pearl was capable of doing.

The next morning John and Ruby went out early to bring back some wood for the stove. They had no shoes to wear, and their coats were not warm enough. It was mid-winter, but the ground was bare of snow. When they came back that afternoon, their feet were bleeding around the toes and their heels had cracked open in several places.

"Where's the fire-wood, John?" Cora asked him.

"We couldn't find any."

Cora put her cloak around her head and shoulders and went out into the alley. There was no wood of any kind there, but up at the other end there was a coal bin that sometimes overflowed into the narrow way. She filled her apron with coal and ran back to the house. The children huddled around the stove, shivering and whimpering, while she kindled the fire.

"I'm hungry, Mama," Ruby said.

"I'll get you something to eat," Cora promised her.

"When are we going to have something to eat again?" John asked her.

"I'll bring you something when I come back."

Pearl piled the quilts on the floor beside the stove and held John and Ruby close beside her in the warmth. Her gingham dress was torn, but her long yellow hair was thick and warm over her shoulders. She held the children close to her and rubbed their toes and heels.

Cora put on her cloak and went out into the alley. She ran to the street and stood there indecisively for a moment until she could make up her mind which direction she would take. She turned down the street this time, instead of going up it.

After she had run and walked for five or six blocks, she came to a cluster of one-story suburban stores. There were several men standing at the curb in front of the buildings. They were waiting for a street car to take them into town. The men turned and looked at Cora when they saw that she was running towards them.

"Mister, give me half a dollar for my children," she pleaded.

The men turned all the way around and looked her up and down. One of them laughed at her.

"Sister," one of them said, "I wouldn't give a dime for you and a dozen more like you."

The others laughed at what he had said. The trolley was coming down the street; it was two or three blocks away, and its bell was clanging. The men stepped out into the street and stood beside the tracks waiting for it to stop. Cora followed them into the street.

"Mister," she said to the man who had spoken to her, "Mister, what would you—"

"Don't call me 'Mister,' " he said angrily. "My name's Johnson."

The others laughed at her again. Johnson stepped forward and looked down at her while his friends continued laughing at her.

"Mr. Johnson," Cora said, "what would you give me half a dollar for?"

"What would I give you half a dollar for?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Johnson. What would you give it to me for?"

He turned around and winked at the other men before answering her. They urged him on.

"Have you got a girl at home?" he asked her.

"Yes, sir. I've got Pearl, and Ruby, too."

"Well, I couldn't give you half a dollar, but I might be able to give you a quarter."

The street car stopped and the door sprang open. The other two men hopped on, calling to Johnson to hurry. He looked at Cora for a moment longer, but when she continued to stand there with her mouth open, unable to say anything, he ran and jumped aboard.

Cora was left standing beside the tracks. When the car started, she stood on her toes and tried to see the man inside. She called to him frantically, trying to make him understand her; and she waved her arms excitedly, attempting to attract his attention. All three of them ran to the rear end of the car and pressed their faces against the glass to see her better. Cora ran down the middle of the street, calling to them and waving her arms to stop them, but the car was soon out of sight and she was left alone on the car tracks. She went to the sidewalk and walked back up the street until she reached the corner in front of the stores where the men had been standing when she first saw them. When she got to the corner, she sat down on the curb to wait.

Cora did not know how long she had waited, but she had promised the children she would bring back some food when she returned, and she had to wait no matter how long the time was. But Johnson finally came back. He got off the street car and walked towards her at the curb. He was surprised to see her there, and he stopped before her and looked at her in amazement. Cora was glad the other men had not come back with him.

She led him up the street, running ahead and urging him to hurry. Even though he followed her without protest, he did not walk fast enough to please Cora, and she was continually asking him to hurry. He stopped once and struck a match for his cigarette against an iron street-light pole, and Cora ran back and pulled at his coat, begging him to follow her as fast as he could walk.

When they got inside the house, Cora awakened Pearl. The man stood close to the door, debating within himself whether to remain or to leave. Cora got behind him and held the door shut so he could not leave.

"How old is she?" he asked Cora.

"She's almost ten now."

"It's cold as hell in this house. Why don't you have some heat in here? You've got a stove there."

"Give me the quarter, and I'll try to get a little coal somewhere."

"Tell her to stand up."

"Stand up, Pearl," Cora told her.

Pearl shrank against the foot of the bed; she was bewildered and frightened. She wished to run to her mother, but the strange man was between them. She was afraid he would catch her before she could reach the door where Cora stood.

"You're lying to me," Johnson said. "She's nowhere near ten."

"I swear to God, Mr. Johnson, she's almost ten. Please, Mr. Johnson, don't go off now."

Johnson looked around the room and saw John and Ruby asleep under the quilts on the bed.

"How old is the other girl?"

"She's eight."

"I don't believe you. You're lying to me. Neither one of them is over eight."

"Pearl's almost ten, Mr. Johnson. I swear before God, she is. Please give me the quarter."

He walked across the room towards Pearl. She tried to run away, but Cora caught her and made her stand beside the foot of the bed. Cora waited behind Johnson.

"Tell her to turn around," he said.

"Turn around, Pearl," Cora told her.

"It's too damn cold in here," he said, his hands trembling. "My feet are frozen. Why don't you make a fire in that stove?"

"If you'll give me the quarter, I'll try to get a little coal somewhere."

"How do I know you're on the level?" he asked her. "I'm afraid of you. You don't look right to me. How do I know you won't go yelling for a cop the first thing?"

"I wouldn't do that. Give me the quarter."

"I'd be in a pretty fix, caught like that. They'd give me twenty years at hard labor. I'd never come out alive."

"I won't tell anybody, Mr. Johnson. I swear to God, I won't. Just give me the quarter."

Johnson pushed his hands into his pockets and looked at Pearl again. His hands were cold, and his feet were, too. His breath looked like smoke in the cold house.

"Tell her to let me see her," he said.

"Let him see you, Pearl," Cora said.

Johnson waited, looking at her and at Cora. He could not stand still while he watched her against the foot of the bed.

"Hurry up, Pearl, and let him see you," Cora urged.

Pearl began to cry.

"They'd give me life for that," Johnson said, backing towards the door. "You'd get a cop after me before I could get out of the house. I don't like the way you look. Why don't you have some heat in here? You've got a stove."

"Honest to God, Mr. Johnson, I wouldn't tell on you. Give me the quarter, and you can trust me."

"Get some heat in here first," he said. "My feet are freezing."

"I can't get any coal till you give me the quarter."

"You can go steal some, can't you?"

"Give me the quarter first, Mr. Johnson."

"How do I know you're on the level? I don't like the way you look."

"I swear to God, I won't tell on you, Mr. Johnson."

Johnson lit a cigarette and inhaled the smoke in the manner of a man gasping for breath. With his lungs and mouth and nostrils dense with smoke, he dropped the stub into the stove and thrust his hands back into his pockets.

"Tell her to come over here," he said.

"Go over there, Pearl."

Johnson bent down and looked at Pearl in the dim light. He straightened up once for a moment, and bent down again and looked at her more closely.

"They'd hang me before tomorrow night if they caught me," he said jerkily.

"Give me the quarter, Mr. Johnson, and I swear to God I won't tell anybody."

"Tell her to stand still."

"Stand still, Pearl."

"For God's sake get some heat in here."

"Give me the quarter first, Mr. Johnson," Cora begged.

"And then go out and tell a cop," he said shrilly.

"Just give me the quarter first."

"You're crazy," he shouted at her. "I don't like the looks of you. How do I know what you'll do? You might run out of here the first thing yelling for a cop."

"Give me the quarter, and I'll get a little coal."

"And tell a cop."

"I swear I won't do that, Mr. Johnson. Give me the quarter, and I'll get some coal."

Johnson turned his back on Cora and went closer to Pearl. He took his hands out of his pockets and blew into them.

"Tell her to stop that crying."

"Stop crying, Pearl."

Johnson reached down and put his hands under Pearl's thick yellow hair, but the moment he touched her, she whirled around and ran to Cora.

"They'd screw my head off of my neck so quick I wouldn't have a chance to think about it."

"Give me the quarter, Mr. Johnson, and I swear to God I won't tell on you."

He hesitated a moment; looking at Pearl, he shoved his hand into his pants pocket and brought out a twenty-five cent piece. Cora grabbed it from his hand and bolted for the door.

"Wait a minute!" he shouted, running and catching her. "Come back here and tell her to keep still before you go."

"Keep still, Pearl," her mother told her.

"Hurry up and get some coal before I freeze to death. And if you tell a policeman, I'll kill the last one of you before they take me. I ought to have better sense than to let you go. I don't like the way you look."

Cora ran out the door and into the alley before he could say anything more to her. She slammed the door and ran with all her might to the end of the alley. Without losing a moment, she raced down the

street towards the one-story stores. After she had gone a block, she stopped and carefully laid the quarter on her tongue and closed her lips tightly so she would be sure not to drop it or lose it on the dark street.

One of the grocery stores was still open. She took the coin out of her mouth, pointing at bread and pressed meat, and placed it in the clerk's hand. He dropped the wet silver piece as though it were white-hot steel and wiped his hands on his apron.

When Cora got back, the children were asleep. John and Ruby were rolled tightly in the quilts, and Pearl was lying on the bed with the coat over her. She had been crying, and the tears had not fully dried on her cheeks; her eyes were inflamed, and her face was swollen across the bridge of her nose. Cora went to the side of the bed and threw the coat from her and looked down at her. Pearl had doubled herself into a knot, with her arms locked around her knees, and her head was thrust forward over her chest. Cora looked at her for a while, and then she carefully replaced the coat over her.

After unwrapping the bread and pressed meat, she stuffed the paper into the stove and struck a match to it. She drew her chair closer and bent forward so she could stretch her arms around the sides of the stove and feel the heat as much as possible before it burned out.

When the stove became cold again, Cora laid the bread and pressed meat on a chair beside her and rolled up in her quilt to wait for day. When the children woke up, the food would be there for them.

FAMILY VITRIOL

by

Mikhäil Zochtchenko

A SHORT time ago, one of our neighbors had a few words with her lawful husband.

Of course, never a week passed but they treated each other to some kind of vitriol . . . but, this time they surpassed even their own expectations.

Then those children of a bitch started chucking things.

He flung the tap of the samovar, and the samovar, you know, started running. This put her in a rage and she hurled a saucer.

He picked up a bit of the smashed saucer and cut himself with it, on purpose. Then he set up a howl that murder was being done.

But she . . . that is to say his wife, Katyoushka Bjelov, showed up how more responsible she was than he.

Ah! she said, that's what you are, is it!

To be short, . . . we may fancy ourselves what she then said.

I, said she, shall stop living with you on the spot! I'll get my things together, straight away, said she, and you can chuck taps at your neighbors as much as you like . . . but, I've had enough of it.

Said he:

You don't say so, said he . . . how you scare me! Do get out, the air will be fresher.

Here again, they exchanged a few lively remarks. A minor skirmish of an intimate nature took place, so to say. Then Katya got her things together, tied them up in a sheet, spat at her lawful scoundrel, and off she went.

She looked up her own fond mother. But the old woman was none too pleased at her coming. To be brief, she didn't exactly jump for joy at sight of her daughter.

I'm only a corner-lodger myself, she said, and as you know, she said, I've none too much room over.

Said Katya:

It's only for a couple of days till I've looked up a room for myself.

The old woman had no ideological doubts concerning that. We all know about that, she said. Others have been looking for a room for 60 years, and haven't found one yet . . . but you, she said, are such a gay lot.

Well, the daughter saw there was nothing to be done, and setting down her bundle in a corner, she went off to see her girl-friend. She had a girl-friend, Tosya.

Said Tosya:

I do indeed feel for you. You may be sure of my moral support, but as I'm living in a small room with my husband myself, there is no good talking about it any further.

Then Katya looked up another lady of her acquaintance. But, nothing came of that either.

Meanwhile night was coming on. One must find somewhere to go to. We don't live in the South.

Katya tried another place. Then she went to the hotel formerly called the "Modern." At the "Modern" they told her . . . we only admit travellers from outside, or we should be spreading corruption. If, for instance, you lived in Moscow, they said, we should take you in with pleasure, but as it is, they said . . . we must beg forgiveness.

After walking the streets for a time, Katyoushka meekly returned to her own cold domestic hearth.

Said her lawful husband:

Aha, so you've come back again. Didn't you get your little feet wet, if you'll excuse my asking, whilst loafing about in the streets?

Thus, they abused each other a bit, supped, and went to bed.

And she dreamt that somebody told her that, somewhere or other, there was a room to be let . . .

Well, generally speaking, the housing-problem is really doing a good bit towards steadying family life.

There are comrades who warn us that the props of family life are tottering . . . that divorces are more frequent, and so on. But, it's not true!

Matrimony is sure enough nowadays . . . sure enough!

TIME

by

H. E. Bates

SITTING on an iron seat fixed about the body of a great chestnut-tree breaking into pink-flushed blossom, two old men gazed dumbly at the sunlit emptiness of a town square.

The morning sun burned in a sky of marvellous blue serenity, making the drooping leaves of the tree most brilliant and the pale blossoms expand to fullest beauty. The eyes of the old men were also blue but the brilliance of the summer sky made a mockery of the dim and somnolent light in them. Their thin white hair and drooping skin, their faltering lips and rusted clothes, the huddled bones of their bodies had come to winter. Their hands tottered, their lips were wet and dribbling, and they stared with a kind of earnest vacancy, seeing the world as a stillness of amber mist. They were perpetually silent, for the deafness of one made speech a ghastly effort of shouting and misinterpretation. With their worn sticks between their knees and their worn hands knotted over their sticks they sat as though time had ceased to exist for them.

Nevertheless every movement across the square was an event. Their eyes missed nothing that came within sight. It was as if the passing of every vehicle held for them the possibility of catastrophe; the appearance of a strange face was a revolution; the apparitions of young ladies in light summer dresses gliding on legs of shell-pink silk had on them something of the effect of goddesses on the minds of young heroes. There were, sometimes, subtle changes of light in their eyes.

Across the square, they observed an approaching figure. They watched it with a new intensity, exchanging also, for the first time, a glance with one another. For the first time also they spoke.

"Who is it?" said one.

"Duke, ain't it?"

"Looks like Duke," the other said. "But I can't see that far."

Leaning forward on their sticks, they watched the approach of this figure with intent expectancy. He, too, was old. Beside him, indeed, it was as if they were adolescent. He was patriarchal. He resembled a biblical prophet, bearded and white and immemorial. He was timeless.

But though he looked like a patriarch he came across the square with the haste of a man in a walking race. He moved with a nimbleness and airiness that were miraculous. Seeing the old men on the seat he waved his stick with an amazing gaiety at them. It was like the brandishing of a youthful sword. Ten yards away he bellowed their names lustily in greeting.

"Well Reuben boy! Well Shepherd!"

They mumbled sombrely in reply. He shouted stentoriously about the weather, wagging his white beard strongly. They shifted stiffly along the seat and he sat down. A look of secret relief came over their dim faces, for he had towered above them like a statue in silver and bronze.

"Thought maybe you warn't coming," mumbled Reuben.

"Ah! been for a sharp walk!" he half-shouted. "A sharp walk!"

They had not the courage to ask where he had walked but in his clear brisk voice he told them, and deducing that he could not have travelled less than six or seven miles they sat in gloomy silence, as though shamed. With relief they saw him fumble in his pockets and bring out a bag of peppermints, black-and-white balls sticky and strong from the heat of his strenuous body, and having one by one popped peppermints into their mouths they sucked for a long time with toothless and dumb solemnity, contemplating the sunshine.

As they sucked, the two old men waited for Duke to speak, and they waited like men awaiting an oracle, since he was, in their eyes, a masterpiece of a man. Long ago, when they had been napkinned and at the breast, he had been a man with a beard, and before they had reached their youth he had passed into a lusty maturity. All their lives they had felt infantile beside him.

Now, in old age, he persisted in shaming them by the lustiness of his achievements and his vitality. He had the secret of a devilish perpetual youth. To them the world across the square was veiled in sunny mistiness, but Duke could detect the swiftness of a rabbit on a hillside a mile away. They heard the sounds of the world as though

through a stone wall, but he could hear the crisp bark of a fox in another parish. They were condemned to an existence of memory because they could not read, but Duke devoured the papers. He had an infinite knowledge of the world and the freshest affairs of men. He brought them, every morning, news of earthquakes in Peru, of wars in China, of assassinations in Spain, of scandals among the clergy. He understood the obscurest movements of politicians and explained to them the newest laws of the land. They listened to him with the devoutness of worshippers listening to a preacher, regarding him with awe and believing in him with humble astonishment. There were times when he lied to them blatantly. They never suspected.

As they sat there, blissfully sucking, the shadow of the chestnut-tree began to shorten, its westward edge creeping up, like a tide, towards their feet. Beyond, the sun continued to blaze with unbroken brilliance on the white square. Swallowing the last smooth grain of peppermint Reuben wondered aloud what time it could be.

"Time?" said Duke. He spoke ominously. "Time?" he repeated.

They watched his hand solemnly uplight itself and vanish into his breast. They had no watches. Duke alone could tell them the passage of time while appearing to mock at it himself. Very slowly he drew out an immense watch, held it out at length on its silver chain, and regarded it steadfastly.

They regarded it also, at first with humble solemnity and then with quiet astonishment. They leaned forward to stare at it. Their eyes were filled with a great light of unbelief. The watch had stopped.

The three old men continued to stare at the watch in silence. The stopping of this watch was like the stopping of some perfect automaton. It resembled almost the stopping of time itself. Duke shook the watch urgently. The hands moved onward for a second or two from half-past three and then were dead again. He lifted it to his ear and listened. It was silent.

For a moment or two longer the old man sat in lugubrious contemplation. The watch, like Duke, was a masterpiece, incredibly ancient, older even than Duke himself. They did not know how often he had boasted to them of its age and efficiency, its beauty and priceless-ness. They remembered that it had once belonged to his father, that

he had been offered incredible sums for it, that it had never stopped since the battle of Waterloo.

Finally Duke spoke. He spoke with the mysterious air of a man about to unravel a mystery, "Know what 'tis?"

They could only shake their heads and stare with the blankness of ignorance and curiosity. They could not know.

Duke made an ominous gesture, almost a flourish, with the hand that held the watch.

"It's the lectric."

They stared at him with dim-eyed amazement.

"It's the lectric," he repeated. "The lectric in me body."

Shepherd was deaf. "Eh?" he said.

"The lectric," said Duke significantly, in a louder voice.

"Lectric?" They did not understand and they waited.

The oracle spoke at last, repeating with one hand the ominous gesture that was like a flourish.

"It stopped yesterday. Stopped in the middle of me dinner," he said. He was briefly silent. "Never stopped as long as I can remember. Never. And then stopped like that, all of a sudden, just at pudden-time. Couldn't understand it. Couldn't understand it for the life of me."

"Take it to the watch-makers?" Reuben said.

"I did," he said. "I did. This watch is older 'n me, I said, and it's never stopped as long as I can remember. So he squinted at it and poked it and that's what he said."

"What?"

"It's the lectric, he says, that's what it is. It's the lectric—the lectric in your body. That's what he said. The lectric."

"Lectric light?"

"That's what he said. Lectric. You're full o' lectric, he says. You go home and leave your watch on the shelf and it'll go again. So I did."

The eyes of the old men seemed to signal intense questions. There was an ominous silence. Finally, with the watch still in his hand. Duke made an immense flourish, a gesture of serene triumph.

"And it went," he said. "It went!"

The old men murmured in wonder.

"It went all right. Right as a cricket! Beautiful!"

The eyes of the old men flickered with fresh amazement. The

fickleness of the watch was beyond the weakness of their ancient comprehension. They groped for understanding as they might have searched with their dim eyes for a balloon far up in the sky. Staring and murmuring they could only pretend to understand.

"Solid truth," said Duke. "Goes on the shelf but it won't go on me. It's the lectric."

"That's what licks me," said Reuben, "the lectric."

"It's me body," urged Duke. "It's full of it."

"Lectric light?"

"Full of it. Alive with it."

He spoke like a man who had won a prize. Bursting with glory, he feigned humility. His white beard wagged lustily with pride, but the hand still bearing the watch seemed to droop with modesty.

"It's the lectric," he boasted softly.

They accepted the words in silence. It was as though they began to understand at last the lustiness of Duke's life, the nimbleness of his mind, the amazing youthfulness of his patriarchal limbs.

The shadow of the chestnut-tree had dwindled to a small dark circle about their seat. The rays of the sun were brilliantly perpendicular. On the chestnut-tree itself the countless candelabra of blossoms were a pure blaze of white and rose. A clock began to chime for noon.

Duke, at that moment, looked at his watch, still lying in his hand.

He started with instant guilt. The hands had moved miraculously to four o'clock and in the stillness of the summer air he could hear the tick of wheels.

With hasty gesture of resignation he dropped the watch into his pocket again. He looked quickly at the old men, but they were sunk in sombre meditation. They had not seen or heard.

Abruptly he rose. "That's what it is," he said. "The lectric." He made a last gesture as though to indicate that he was the victim of some divine manifestation. "The lectric," he said.

He retreated nimbly across the square in the hot sunshine and the old men sat staring after him with the innocence of solemn wonder. His limbs moved with the haste of a clockwork doll and he vanished with incredible swiftness from sight.

The sun had crept beyond the zenith and the feet of the old men were bathed in sunshine.

FISHERMAN'S BRIDE

by

Charles Kendall O'Neill

"WHEN does Tomas come?" asked Joe.

Catalina laughed and shook the frying-pan at him.

"When he gets beautiful in his black suit," she said.

Catalina had been with us for more than two weeks now. Pabla brought her in to help Maria with the work when the new carabinero captain came. The captain was a heavy stroke of luck for the fonda. He brought his wife and his three daughters and their goodlooking clothes with him from Morocco and they stayed at the fonda because the captain didn't know how long he was going to be in Mallorca and the goodlooking clothes didn't leave him enough money to stay at Vargo's hotel in the port. They took their baths at Vargo's because Vargo's had plumbing but the eating, sleeping, knitting and political talking was done at Pabla's.

We'd finished our dinner early and were in the kitchen waiting for Tomas to show up. It was Thursday night and he was due in from four days of tuna fishing.

"The señora is having curaçao with the captain tonight," said Maria.

She poured out the regular coffees and put two little glasses on the tray. Catalina leaned over from the stove to look out at the captain and his wife at the table. She put her two first fingers together and laughed.

When Maria first brought Catalina in to us, she was an intense dark smile and a limp. Maria had explained some of this the week before. Catalina was fourteen months married to Tomas, a young fisherman, and her first child had been born dead four months before. It left her the limp and the intense smiling. She was the darkest young woman in Urba, almost pure Moor. Her hair was strong, black and

shiny and she was always using her wide mouth and full lips for laughing. There was something rich about her voice. Rafael told us one time that when she was a girl she was always singing and playing at being an actress.

Joe imitated her favorite gesture. He held his first fingers up together.

"Will Tomas be needing mentha tonight?" he asked.

Maria came back from the dining room while Joe was saying this.

"I can get him some lobster," she said.

Catalina laughed and shook her head and her finger.

"He will have no need for the green drink nor the lobster tampoco," she said. "He has been four days on the sea."

"Ai," said Maria. "I will be able to sleep in peace."

Catalina slept with her at the fonda when Tomas was at sea. For the two or three days he was ashore the couple stayed in their little house on the Calle de la Roca.

"Tomas, Tomas," said Maria. "All the nights it gives me grief in the stomach to hear of this sleeping with Tomas. Luna de miel, always luna de miel."

Catalina stretched and smiled like a dog in the sun and started humming *Negra Consentida.*

"Soon April comes," said Maria, "and the tuna will swim away to cold water and Tomas will stay on land and I will sleep alone and be content."

"You are too young and warm to sleep alone and be content," said Catalina.

She winked shamelessly and started singing aloud. Joe and I went out to the estanca for cigarettes. We met Francisco there and he told us the latest adventure of small son Toni. This time it was biting a puppy's ear.

Tomas was at the table in the kitchen when we got back. He looked slight and young in the black suit. He was eating from a bowl of rice with pieces of fish and peppers in it.

"Bienvenido, Tomas. What luck, thousands of tuna?"

It was the same as the first time. He wasn't at ease coming in for Catalina. His hard brown hand pushed the wooden fork around in the rice.

"Not bad," he said. "Nine."

"Big ones?"

"One would be seventy kilos."

"What big fish he brings," said Catalina.

She came over, swinging her stiff right leg as she walked, and kissed him juicily on the back of the neck. He pushed her away embarrassed and she laughed at him and rumpled his hair. His light hair and eyebrows made him look even shyer and younger than he was. He pushed her away again and she jabbed him under the armpit with her fingers. He covered up with his elbow and twisted in his chair.

"What foolishness," he said. "Finish your work."

Catalina laughed at him and took a towel to help Maria with the dishes. He drank some more red wine and pushed into the rice again.

Maria was singing a Mallorquin song over and over again. Catalina sang the last line of one bit and looked over at Tomas. He shifted in his chair and pulled out a pack of tight little cigarettes. He had one of the yellow rope lighters, the kind that are cheaper than matches.

"What do you sing, Maria?" I asked.

"Of the luna de miel," she said.

The expression was the same as in English—luna de miel, honeymoon.

"How does it go?"

She sang it again.

"But that's in Mallorquin. Put it in Spanish."

She hummed a minute to fit the words.

"In the moon of honey
Candles will burn and go out
Olive trees grow and fall down
Candles will burn and go out
All in the moon of honey."

"Sing the other part, Maria," said Catalina.

She laughed and pushed Maria's shoulder.

"No," said Maria. "It is not for niños."

She scrubbed away at a dish. Catalina sang different words to the

same air and Tomas grinned as she looked at him. It was in fast Mallorquin again and we couldn't understand.

Tomas was shifting around and smoking cigarettes for nearly fifteen minutes before Catalina finished with the dishes and went up to Maria's room. While she was gone he threw away a cigarette that was only half burned. She came back with her apron off and a black mantilla over her head.

Bartolome, Pabla's dark-looking Prince Albert, came over as we were leaving the kitchen. He stopped us by the bar.

"Olé!" he said. "Ola-a-a-y! Mucho rum."

He let out some Moorish-sounding whoops as he filled up the glasses. He poured out four and Joe and I picked up ours. Tomas didn't understand that one was for him. Bart pointed to it and whooped some more.

"Mucha luna de miel," he said. "Mucho rum. Ola-a-a-y!"

We lifted up our glasses. Bart looked at Tomas and gave the old toast.

"Salud, pesetas y fuerza en las casteñetas."

"Para todos," said Tomas.

He looked at Catalina and Catalina had a rush of laughing and he drank quickly.

"Four from me," said Joe.

Tomas was embarrassed again.

"No," he said. "It is late now. Another time."

Catalina took him by the arm. Maria yawned with a luxuriant little moan.

"Catalina will be this way tired in the morning," she said. "She can't wait any longer."

It was a triumphal procession to the door and we were whooping and cheering and calling advice after them as they went up the dark street toward the Calle de la Roca.

It was a fine sunny morning two weeks later. Maria had her palm toward me, closing and unclosing her fingers. In Mallorca that meant come here. The hand-motions for come here and goodbye were just wrong. When the back of the hand was towards you and the fingers closing in, that meant go away, adios. It was very mixing in the beginning.

"Come, come," said Maria, "this is very good."

"What is it?" I asked.

She motioned me to follow her and spoke over her shoulder as she walked.

"Now it is April and the tuna have gone away. Tomas sleeps on shore since yesterday until the autumn."

We went into the kitchen. Catalina was talking to Pabla. Maria caught her by the arm and made her come out. She was swinging her stiff leg and laughing.

"Tell him what you do," said Maria.

"It gives me grief," said Catalina, smiling all over her face, "but I am going. Pabla will have to get some one else. Tuna season is over and the men of Tomas' boat catch the lobster now. He says I am too tired at night if I work all day. He wants me home."

"You see?" said Maria. "Always it is luna de miel."

Catalina shook my hand in big sweeping shakes.

"Our house is your house," she said. "You will all come and see us."

"All the time," I said. "Even at night."

Maria held up her two first fingers together and took Catalina by the arm.

"First we will scrub the plates and cups of this breakfast," she said. "Then you can go to Tomas for all the hours and days in the year."

BLACK JESUS

by

John Cowles

"How you goin' do 'at?"

"Ah'm goin' do it, Boll Weevil."

"You ain't goin' do it, Black Jesus, widout no dollah."

"No?"

"They ain't a dollah in a whole bull-pen, an' you ain't goin' in a woods without."

"Boll Weevil, look at 'at."

"You ain't gittin' none, fo' no foah bits. How'd you git 'at foah bit piece?"

"A's all right. How Ah got it, Ah kin git anothah."

"Sure 'nough, Black Jesus, you goin' in a woods, tonight?"

"Sure 'nough, Boll Weevil."

"Oh boy. An' 'at gal been restin' up a week, waitin' fo' pay-day. How you goin' take it?"

"Slow an' long time."

" 'At's goin' be poon tang."

"Boll Weevil, you said it, right. An' let me tell you mo'. 'At gal's goin' like it, so's she goin' want it tomorro' too. An' tomorro' ain't pay-day yet."

"Not 'at gal."

"Ah'm tellin' you now, Boll Weevil, Ah'm goin' git it free, come tomorrow."

"Black Jesus. Doan you trash talk me."

"Trash talk? Ah seen you stan'in' in line, waitin' to spend you' dollah, las' pay-day. An' didn't you heah 'at gal hollah out fo' mo' an' plenty?"

"Yas."

" 'At was me, Boll Weevil."

"Oh boy. Ain't they anothah dollah loose?"

"They ain't but foah bits in a whole bull-pen, an' 'at's goin' be right along with this'n', tonight. Come on, fo' awhile. No good stan'in' heah in a dahk."

The lantern still flung light about the bunk-house. The smoking wick had blackened the chimney, but most of the room was still visible. Men stood in bare feet, sat on the side of bunks, or lay stretched out. It was the sullen fatigue of four days of the shovel, and the straight-down glare of the summer Arkansas sun; Thursday night, with no more money till pay-day. Men sprawled, sat drooped with their hands hanging limp, heads sunk in their shoulders. Over all hung the mingling smells of sweat, and feet, and breath, and lamp smoke. The chimney blackened, till only a ring around the bottom gave off light. Men rolled into their bunks, fell into the second tiers, and climbed heavily onto the top row. The lantern smoked all through the night. Slight movements of air brought the outside chill into the bunk-house. It slid along bodies, searching out the small of backs where shirt and overalls had separated, and penetrated blankets pulled around heads and shoulders. As the chill grew, and pressed the bodies into moulds, it became grey and visible, and drew features into sharp lines. From chill and grey, it grew into dawn. A true light cast even shadows. It picked out the heavy skull-bones of Cotton. It lengthened the shadow of his nose over the tough hollow of his cheek, till it cast high-light on the muscles of his jaw. His wide heavy lips were moving as he came awake, cursing at always waking up, cold.

He stretched out his legs, and rolled onto his back. He did not open his eyes, at once. For a while, he was not back in the world. For a while, he would not even open his mouth. When his tongue began sliding over the roof of his mouth and along his teeth, it brought away the flat, slack taste of his whole life. When he opened his eyes he saw only the sag of the body above him. For a few moments he lay there tasting and seeing, then he quietly got up and went outside. As he walked to the pump, he thrust his hands in his pockets. Suddenly, he tried to stop in the middle of a stride. His hands were empty. There should have been a fifty-cent piece in his right, and three cigarettes in his left. He was motionless, for a second, then he moved on again to

the pump. He washed his head and neck, and while he was standing with his feet wide apart, his arms hung away from him and his head thrust forward to drip, it dawned on him. God damn that Black Jesus. Probably got poon tang with it, too.

A bell clanged from the cook-house. Men came slouching out of their sleep, to the benches and long table set with hominy mush and pork. There was battle in every eye. No one spoke. They had barely time to eat, when the warning whistle of the work-train blew. Shambling and mooching along, the crowd made over to the siding, and picked up tools, climbed aboard, as the first splotches of sunlight fell on the flat-cars. The train backed off the siding and gathered speed along the main line. The cold morning air shook their bones. They lay flat or found shelter in the lee of the caboose. By the time they reached the work, every man of them was chattering his teeth.

"Black sons-of-a-bitchin' bastards, hit the ground. Do you want me to start bending' pick-handles?"

They looked sullenly at the boss, and half fell, half climbed off the train, dragging their shovels and crow-bars after them. Still in a stiff daze, they moved over to the edge of trees and dropped coats and lunch. Slowly they moved back to the track, and as though they had never seen a shovel began pushing at it with a foot, leaning and spitting on their hands. The sun warmed their lizard bodies, and they spat more often on their hands, watching the boss sidewise.

"Get on it and dig."

The boss was watching them warm up. Between him and the sun, they'd work. When he thought it was time, he went over to the line of trees on the right-of-way and disappeared. Snake, the singin'-nigger, slid up to where Black Jesus and Boll Weevil were soldiering, and began chanting obscenity.

It made them laugh, and as Snake moved along the track, intoning, he made them all laugh, till they swung a rhythm. The sun bit across their shoulders, where the shirts pulled.

They all swung in the bawdy rhythm, but Cotton. Sullen and bitter, he swung his shovel, at his own hard pace. It bit the dirt out, and he flung it sharply without straightening his back. He bit and flung in sullen resentment. He never looked where the boss had gone to be working hard when he came out. He swung his shovel, till the hard,

steely sun hurt his back. Leaning his long shovel against his shoulder, he put both hands on the small of his back to straighten up, and looked around. Black Jesus and Boll Weevil were looking at him. He saw them say something behind their hands and look at each other, and laugh. His smouldering eyes blazed, and he might have spoken, but the voice of the boss cut:

"Get your crow-bars. We're goin' to move the track."

The gang straggled across the tracks and lined up, with their bars set against the rail. They leaned against them, and made out to be pushing. The boss took a look at them and reached for an idle crow-bar.

"Hey, you god damn black Snake, you goin' to make 'em work, or you want to use this?"

Snake came to, suddenly:

"Hey. Ho.
Take a mule
An' a jack
To line
This track."

The heave came hard on the end of each line, and the gang reset their bars. The boss pushed the gang along the rail farther, to move the further section.

"Make it move, Snake."

"Evalina
An' her daughter
Run a whore-house
On a water
One side . . ."

"All right, now come back again!"

"One side
Young gennelmen
Otheh side
Young lad'es
One side . . ."

"All right, now you black bastards, get into it, and finish up, down yonder!"

"One side
Rudabagas

Otheh side
Lady lovehs."

"Back to the shovels. Come on, boy. Bring the water pail."

Cotton fell into his sullen mood, again, and worked on, in the heat and glare. By now, his hands were sore, and his feet hurt where the gravel had got over the tops of his shoes. If there was only some way of hangin' it on that Black Jesus. Nobody had ever caught Black Jesus.

When dinner hour came, Cotton stuck his long handled shovel straight up and down into the soft fill, and went over to his coat and lunch. At first he was too tired to eat, just sitting on the ground with his elbows on his knees and his hands hung between his calves. Then listlessly he pulled the box to him, and opened it between his legs. He pawed around in the mess and brought out a couple of chunks of bread, and a piece of pork. He bit into one, then bit into the other, and began moving his heavy jaws in a slow rhythm of eating. The slack, nasty taste came back into his mouth again, and he stopped, wondering if he would be able to swallow. Finally he gulped it, and sat vacant-minded, while his fingers scratched just above his shoe-tops, where the red-bugs had put his legs on fire. When his mind came off dead center, again, it was brooding. Must be some way of hangin' it on Black Jesus. A cigarette would take that taste out of his mouth. Just one of those mashed, flat, weeds. He wouldn't give a damn for the four bits if he had just one weed. Just half a weed.

"Come on the job, you mother-lovin' bastards!"

For a moment longer, Cotton hung inert, then he hoisted onto his feet, and stalked out of the shade into the swaying heat of the open right-of-way. He could see his shovel upright at the top of the fill, and he walked toward it with his eyes fixed. As he made the grade, an arm came into his line of sight; an arm, and a hand grasping his long-handled shovel. Cotton jumped.

"Loose 'at shovel! Black Jesus!"

"Takin' nothin' offa you, yellow belly!"

They struggled a moment, then Cotton wrenched loose and swung the shovel high to keep it out of Jesus' reach. It didn't look that way to Jesus. With a clumsy rush, he started down the fill. Cotton never knew he let the shovel fall, but somehow Jesus crumpled, and blood was oozing through his skull. Cotton froze. The battle went out of his eyes.

"You bashed him, 'at time, Cotton."

"Lovin' God. Black Jesus done fo', sure."

"Man. 'At Jesus hadn' ought to trifle with 'at Cotton."

"Look at 'im, Boll Weevil."

"He breathin' still."

"Not fo' long. Heah 'at rattle."

"What the hell's goin' on here?"

"Black Jesus daid."

"How come he's dead?"

" 'At Cotton bash 'im one."

"Where is Cotton?"

"Cotton light out fo' the woods. Long gone."

"Stand back and give him air. I can hear him breathin'. You Boll Weevil, and you Snake, get the push-car, and take him into camp. Hurry up. Get him into camp, and you other bastards, back on the job. Lost too much time already."

They loaded the grotesque body onto the car, head to the front, so the bloody wool wouldn't be just under their eyes. They put Jesus' coat and his own hat under his head, laid their own coats beside him, and hitched up their pants to pull in their belts. Boll Weevil and Snake, between the rails, leaning well forward to get the car in motion, started off slow, with even steady steps. The gang watched.

"You see 'im do it, Snake?"

"Yas, Ah seen 'im all."

"How come it happen?"

"Look like to me, Cotton goin' bash 'im f'om a staht."

"Yas?"

"Look like he got a grievance an' a misery."

"Black Jesus done gone in a woods, las' night."

"How come he done 'at?"

"Show me foah bits, an' say like he got anothah foah bits he can git. Las' night Ah heah him fumblin' aroun', den he long gone."

"True, Boll Weevil?"

"True's you' bohn, Snake. An' he talk big about 'at gal, an' say tonight he goin' git it free."

"Doan look like it to me, Boll Weevil. Seem like Black Jesus goin' rest awful easy, tonight."

"Yas, less'n he daid, an' his ha'nt trouble 'im big."

"He breathin' good?"

"Cain't rightly tell, Snake."

"Le's stop an' lissen."

"Yas. No, he breathin' good. Le's git along, Snake. Le's git outa heah."

"Seem like he breathin' loud. Awful loud."

"Seem like he is, too."

"Le's git along an' fas', Boll Weevil."

"Snake. He breathin' too loud. He breathin' too loud."

"Mebbe, he goin' be daid."

"Ef he daid, how we goin' sleep, tonight?"

"Put a dime undah you' haid."

"Ain' a dime in a whole bull-pen."

"Den he sure 'nough goin' ha'nt somebody."

"Snake. Ah cain't heah him breathin'."

" 'At's right, Boll Weevil, he done quit."

"What'll we do?"

"Le's go for a woods."

"Fo' Lawd'sake, no, Snake. He git us shuah, in a woods."

"Den we run an' push 'im, good."

The heavy wheels turned faster. Their bodies tautened out, and their knees made long jagged angles. Ahead was the last curve coming into camp. Their breath was short and cramps stumbled their feet on the ties as they made the curve. Sweat was running into their eyes, but through the blur, they could see the switch was open, and gasping, they ran the car onto the siding.

In the bunk-house, that night, they all sat close around the lantern.

"Where's 'at, you think Black Jesus is?"

"Hush you' mouth, Boll Weevil, an' doan speak 'at name. You want a ha'nt sittin' on you' shouldahs?"

"Gawd A'mighty, Snake, no."

" 'Atta sho' certain way, lessen. . . ."

"Know what Ah tol' you, Snake, wheah he was goin' tonight."

"Yas. An' 'at gal doan know he's daid."

"Ain't nobody goin' in a woods, neithah."

"Ah ain't."
"Not dis black boy."
"Ah wouldn' give nothin' fo' that gal's chances."
"Ef he go in a woods, he doan come in a bull-pen."
"Mebbe she sleep wid a dime, all a time."
"Likely he carry his haid, an' show it to Cotton, wheah is a blood."
"Likely he do. Den he doan come in a bull-pen."
"What you think, Boll Weevil?"
"Dunno, Snake, but he got a date with 'at gal."

Black Jesus lay on his back and felt tired as death. His arms and legs were heavy, when he tried to move them, and his head was leaden. A great weight was over him that made him content to lie, as in a short nap after waking. Creeping up his spine to his skull came an urge. Crawling through his body came the need, sweeping in mounting surges. At first slow, then surging almost to his deadened brain. That woman in the woods that he said he'd take free. Got to have that woman tonight. Got to move, pretty soon, and go for it. Got to go in the woods and get it.

He had to move slowly, and his head ached like a bottle of white mule. By hardly touching the ground with his feet, he could keep from jarring the pain in his head. As he moved along to the shack in the woods, he was losing the heaviness, as though leaving it behind. It was easier moving now, and he felt like nothing could stop him, not even a door nor the side of a house.

Just go and get it and not say a word to her. Just take it and go away. She'd try to hold him. Try to hold Black Jesus. She wouldn't be the first one.

A strip of light came through the door and the barred square beside it. He could see the bed, and her black legs pulled up. He went around the shack, and through the door.

" 'At you, Black Jesus? What you mean, scarin' a body, like 'at? You ain't mannerly, comin' in on folks without knockin'. Jes'a same, Ah'm glad you come. You's a dollah-gittines' black boy evah Ah see. An' what you want, Ah happen to have right with me. Come on, Tol'able, Ah'm a black back fo' you' greenback. 'At a sure 'nough trade.

Oh boy. You don' waste time an' talk. When you gits a notion, you goes right to it.

"Black Jesus, Ah'm goin' pray fo' you, goin' pray to you. Pray fo' you. . . . You sure is mah Savior, an' a Lamb o' God. Oh, Jesus! Jesus goin' save me! Washed in a blood of a Lamb! Oh, Jesus, don't stop now! Black Jesus! Way up in Heav'm! Comin' in a ahms of a Lawd! Oh, Jesus!

"Back home!"

Black Jesus rolled over and sat on the edge of the bed. He was easy in his mind, and he straightened up to fasten his belt. Like he always had to do before he could finish with a woman, he had to leave without paying her. All the time, he could hear her talking.

"When you goin' come ag'in, Black Jesus? Tomorruh's pay-day, an' Ah don' want any black trash comin' ahead o' you. Ah gotta have they dollahs, but Ah gotta have you fuhst. An' what's mo', sugah cane, Ah don't want you triflin' on me."

It was the same story like all his life it had been. He just looked at her while she talked.

"Promise me, 'at you'll come along, jes' as soon as you make you' pay."

Every woman made him promise something, but this time he just turned toward the door. Before he could get there, she got in front of him, backed against the door.

"You ain' goin' git out o' heah, 'fo' you promise me, Black Jesus!"

Without haste he held toward the door, as though she were not in the room.

"Git away f'om me, Black Jesus!"

A great heaviness was creeping over him. He felt like he had to get somewhere, before he was all numb.

"Don' you come close 'fo' you talk, lookin' like 'at!"

She was just against him, but he couldn't help that. He had to get where he was going.

Black Jesus was moving back through the woods, but the cold weight had almost got over him. It was coming up over him, where he had left it behind.

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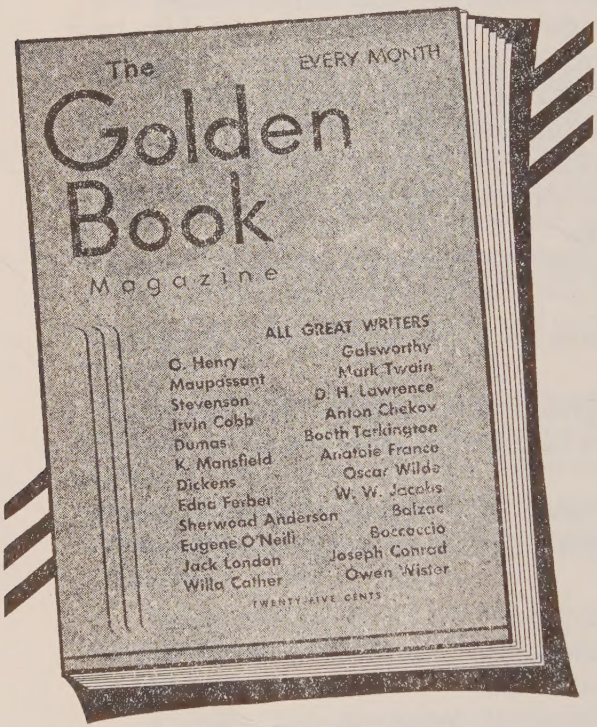

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